



Alambique. Revista académica de
ciencia ficción y fantasía / Jornal
acadêmico de ficção científica e
fantasia

Volume 4 | Issue 1

Article 3

Televisual Subjectivities in Pepe Rojo's Speculative Fiction from Mexico: 1996-2003

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Recommended Citation

Tobin, Stephen C. (2016) "Televisual Subjectivities in Pepe Rojo's Speculative Fiction from Mexico: 1996-2003," *Alambique. Revista académica de ciencia ficción y fantasía / Jornal acadêmico de ficção científica e fantasia*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 1 , Article 3.

<https://www.doi.org/http://dx.doi.org/10.5038/2167-6577.4.1.3>

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/alambique/vol4/iss1/3>

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“Dentro de la pupila de Ray, un cuadrado deforme. Adentro del cuadrado, la imagen de la televisión. En la imagen de la televisión, la cara de Ray. En la cara de Ray, sus pupilas. Dentro de las pupilas, un cuadro deforme.”

Pepe Rojo, *Punto cero*

The rapidly changing visual sphere of 1990s Mexico profoundly affected Pepe Rojo.¹ His fantastical writing expresses an urgency regarding the country's visual practices that signal a greater transformation occurring in vision and visuality within Mexico during this globalized era. By “vision” I mean the perceptual experience of seeing whereas “visuality” refers the social, psychological and historical practices associated with vision. Even when the overarching themes in Rojo's fiction do not directly engage with these elements, the subject matter surfaces noticeably, as if exhibiting instances of a minor symptom to a larger underlying cause. His compositions abound in jarring visual motifs, instances where eyes are removed, altered, replaced or operated upon, where mirrors are frequently the site of elusive or deceptive identifications, or where electronic screens—almost always television—become charged narrative forces with inexplicable, fantastic gravitational pull. In the epigraph above taken from Rojo's novel, *Punto cero* (2000), the omniscient narrator describes the main character Ray Dominguez sitting in his apartment watching television. The description here recursively interweaves his eyes with television in a *mise-en-abyme* where the focalization of narrative description makes it difficult to discern where the locus of visual perception, the eye, is separate from its focus, the television screen. Similarly, Ray himself feels caught between the media news narrative unfolding on the screen, the one that reports he has been kidnapped and will be killed if the ransom is not met, and the life he is living out in his apartment where he is certain he has not been kidnapped and affirms there are no kidnappers present. The disjointed scene not only foregrounds the central role that this medium has come to play in contemporary Mexico's field of vision but it also emphasizes the fundamental, if problematic, function of television in the formation of subjectivities. To date, what little scholarly treatment of Rojo's work that has taken place has strongly associated the writer with the Mexican cyberpunk movement through which he emerged, and his work has thus tended to be synonymously conflated with it altogether. This has in effect obscured the fact that his most perspicacious contribution to Mexican letters, however marginalized his writing has been viewed to the country's literary establishment, contributes to an understanding regarding important transformations that the nation was undergoing at the time, particularly those related to Mexico's television industry. This article, then, analyzes three of Rojo's fictional narratives—“Ruido gris” (1996), *Punto cero* (2000) and “El presidente sin órganos” (2003)²—that all articulate a “televisual subjectivity”³ unique to Mexico at the time of their writing. I define this term as a subjectivity produced from a social space that has become rapidly and so overwhelmingly populated with television screens that is has such far-reaching potential to dominate, deceive or distort one's sense of self; taken together, these stories offer a multi-pronged critique of Mexico from the mid-1990s to the early 2000s, articulating the social effects wrought by neoliberal economic policy upon the mass media industries, the psychological effects of a social sphere being overrun with violent, audiovisual spectacles and the changing nature of the political realm as one essentially embodied in a president whose media presence increasingly precedes him.

The role of vision in Rojo's work is overwhelmingly linked to the televisual—not the cybernetic—as is often the case with the Mexican cyberpunk writers with which he is frequently

associated. As Hernán Manuel García writes, Mexican cyberpunk narratives were preoccupied with a variety of thematics tied to the burgeoning cyber-sphere:

Las representaciones más recurrentes [...] que los cuentos [ciberpunk] presentan son: imágenes de tribus “pos-urbanas”, drogas tecnificadas, edificios abandonados y vandalizados, territorios dominados por bandas, discotecas de ambiente negro enclavadas en un más oscuro barrio, mercenarios con prótesis letales, descomunales fiestas de *hackers*, prostitutas de carnes flácidas que compiten contra irresistibles *virtual girls*, y el entorno de la realidad virtual como vía de perdición. (334)

The cybernetic signified so commonly associated with the movement clearly had relevant antecedents within Mexico, such as when the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional leveraged the global communicative capabilities of the internet via its web page to broadcast its message of resistance against the Mexican federal government in 1994; likewise, it responded to the existing pockets of *hacktivism* that existed throughout the country throughout the latter part of the 1990s. While Manuel García’s research into this area has brought to light the importance of the diffuse literary cyberpunk movement and its critique of the social, economic and political effects of NAFTA, it falls short in recognizing the key role that television has played in the country at this time. The cyberpunk subgenre in Mexico, with its recurring mythic figures of rebellious hackers, synthetic drugs and lethal cyborg mercenaries armed with prosthetics, was incipient and therefore more notional than reflecting a widespread social reality. Pepe Rojo’s work highlights the importance of television—especially when considering the larger transformation occurring in the 1990s with regard to the reconfiguration of the Mexico’s television industries; nowhere else throughout the cyberpunk corpus is television as formative and determining as a rhetorical or thematic device, except in Rojo’s texts.

As might be assumed, the ratio of televisions to computer screens in Mexico around this time favors the former; the notable factor worth considering is the extent of this disparity. Census figures regarding both the number of television sets versus computer screens present in homes throughout Mexico begin in the year 2000, making the numbers in the 1990s a calculated speculation. According to the Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía (INEGI), the television-to-computer screen ratio is 86%-9% in 2000, 91%-19% in 2005 and 94%-29.5% in 2010 (“Viviendas particulares...” n.p.). While these statistics begin only at the time when Rojo’s stories are written, I would argue they still represent the extent to the popularity of television in Mexico, especially when considering the large disparity between the two as of 2000. These numbers, when broken down by region, reach almost near ubiquity in urban areas—the settings of Rojo’s narratives—(D.F. 97%, Jalisco 96%, Guanajuato 95%, etc.), with sparser numbers in the rural regions (Oaxaca 69.6%, Chiapas 69.1%). Beyond the presence of televisions in households throughout Mexico, there is another acutely important factor when considering Pepe Rojo: the material presence of television screens in Tijuana, where he lives. Television assembly plants began moving to Mexico in 1985 after the yen fell sharply, making the country an attractive spot for cheap electronics manufacturing labor. By the end of 1987, Sony, Samsung, Matsushita, Hitachi and Sanyo had moved to Tijuana. By 1993, they had produced a total of 4,940,908 million televisions, and in 1995 this figure reached 7 million (Benítez 218). By 1996, up to 16% of all maquiladora labor in Tijuana was dedicated to making televisions, reaching a production capacity of more televisions than any other city/country worldwide and earning it the moniker of “la capital

mundial del televisor” (Cervantes n.p.).⁴ These factors all indicate that television had reached media hegemony within Mexico by the decade's close.

Of all the cyberpunk writers, then, Rojo's work remains unique within the cyberpunk movement as the singular expression of an omnipresent televisuality that most characterized Mexico's visual sphere in the late 1990s. Televisuality, understood here broadly as the subject's psychological encounter as mediated through the audio-visual experience of television and all its related phenomena, persists as the hard kernel of his literary production. Importantly, it also reflects larger transformations happening in the media sphere within the country at this time. For example, the neoliberalization of the television industry⁵ brought with it a number of consequences: an increase in multinational partnerships within the industry which in turn resulted in an increase of foreign—mostly US—programming; a heightened reliance upon ratings as a measure of gauging audience viewership and by extension the cost of commercial advertising; an increase in reality-style television programs; an increase in commodity circulation brought on by NAFTA which in turn created a surge in the frequency of television advertising for commodities more generally. Rojo's work critically reflects upon all of these elements that potentially impacted the visuality of Mexico throughout the 1990s, which makes his writing worth considering more closely.

The remainder of this study will focus upon the relationship between ratings and violent spectacle as represented in “Ruido gris,” how televisual media have transformed the manufacture of political power in the era of televisual presidents in “El presidente sin órganos,” and how television functions as a site for subjective misidentifications in the novel *Punto cero*. All of these stories offer differing articulations of televisual subjectivities in the neoliberal Mexico of the 1990s and early 2000s.

“Ruido gris”

“Ruido gris” begins with a buzzing in the protagonist's head that will not let him fall asleep. This noise opens as well as closes the narrative, and it signals the traumatic event that precedes as well as pervades the story: an unnamed media company has altered and partially taken over the protagonist's raw, unmediated vision via a surgical operation. A camera is attached to his right eye's retina and a microphone to his vocal chords to allow his eyes and mouth to transmit his subjective visual and auditory experience back to the media company; he has become an “ocular reporter.” Various reality programs will record the subjective viewpoint of his eyes and sound from his mouth and ears, either later editing and compiling for a reality-news television show such as *Rojo Digital*, or, if the report holds enough interest for the media company, they will directly broadcast it live out to thousands of viewers. His previously sensorial functions of seeing and listening have been converted into a form of labor in the service of a mass media corporation that contractually obligates him to provide his services six hours per day, seven days per week. The pursuit of ever-higher ratings drives this exploitation. Thus, his vision is no longer an organic function of his body, nor is it his own; he has been converted into a televisual cyborg. According to *The Cyborg Handbook* (1995), cyborgs take on one of four possible forms: restorative, normalizing, reconfiguring and enhancing (Gray 3). The protagonist in “Ruido gris” would be considered reconfigured because his body and vision have been altered for no other purpose than to serve the exploitative ends of the television media industry. One could argue that the operation has enhanced his ability to remember since he can access what he sees and records after the fact, but he does not view this functionality as an enhancement in any way. This is clear from his general

depressed disposition, malaise and intense sense of a lack of purpose in life, all of which his nickname “El Desencantado,” given to him by the station manager who speaks into his earpiece, succinctly epitomizes.

“Ruido gris” posits the reconfigured human subject as a pawn in the multinational media corporations’ pursuit of profit by any and all means. For the protagonist, this equates to garnering higher ratings in the pursuit of ever more violent spectacles. In this dystopian Mexico mediasphere, the impetus to seek out and report on more and more sensational events is justified by the company by its increase in audience viewership and thus in ratings. This clearly parallels a larger shift in how television began to function in the 1990s, succumbing to the logic of the market. Higher viewership equals higher ratings which ultimately result in higher commercial advertisement revenues—the key source of television capital revenue. The term “ratings”—in English—surfaces in five key instances throughout the story, signaling this factor as the key arbiter of value and its newfound importance at this historical juncture in the industry of Mexican television. In an early sequence of the story, the protagonist stumbles onto the aftermath of a kidnapping involving a child taken by one of the perpetrators. Our ocular reporter arrives at the scene late and is able to gain access to the mother who, crying, begins to criticize the police for letting the child get shot in the altercation. A paramedic attempts to take the baby from the mother, but she refuses. Suddenly, the program director tells the protagonist through his earpiece: “no lo pudimos planear mejor, esto es drama, espérate a recoger tu cheque, los *ratings* le pondrían varios ceros” (99). The more dramatic the spectacle, this scene emphasizes, the more viewers and, in turn, the more money made—both for the company and for worker. Other moments in the narration when bizarre and violent spectacle becomes synonymous with high ratings not only corroborate this link but show to what extent the logic has become internalized in the seeing subject. He himself begins to imagine what the program director would say regarding ratings or how what he is recording will be received (104, 113, 116). The viewers are now the product sold to advertising companies in this new visual economy, which intensifies the idea inversion of the idea of a “consumer sovereignty” in which consumer demand determines supply (Williams 89). This foregrounds these changes occurring on the ground in Mexico around this time.

This measuring of audience ratings was by no means a new invention at the time, given that the Nielsen ratings system began measuring audience viewership as early as the 1950s in the US. Nevertheless, in the case of Mexico, there exists a unique confluence of multiple factors that made the importance of ratings more noticeable as well as the key standardized measurement to viewing habits. First, The Nielsen Company entered Mexico in 1991 and has since become the leading means (though not the only) of measuring viewership in television and radio. This service directly relates to the success or failure of programs that run on a particular channel; this is due almost exclusively to the relationship that this has with the setting of advertising costs. It is, in effect, what sets the exchange value in monetary terms for publicity in television; the higher the ratings, the higher the ad revenue. This factor alone helps to inform the driving narrative element of ratings in “Ruido gris,” but it is also bolstered further by the introduction of competition into the open-air television market. In 1993, under new ownership TV Azteca began competing more successfully against Televisa making such a ratings system of unprecedented importance—given the previously uncontested monopoly of the latter. These factors were brought about from larger changes covered in the introduction regarding neoliberal policy that reduced government expenditures and privatized national industries, as was the case with the then state-run television company, Imevisión, in 1993.⁶ The rating system came to be the key measurement in this era of heightened competition caused by the privatization of public channels and the subsequent rise of

TV Azteca that resulted. As media scholars Omar Hernandez and Emile McAnany have pointed out,

Market forces can have unforeseen political and cultural consequences. Thus, the new playing field in Mexican open television was made possible in the first place by the privatization efforts of the Salinas de Gortari administration, and the commercial interests of the market have been the main factors in shaping it to this day (393).

Pierre Bourdieu takes this assertion a step farther and helps to explain how these economic factors can influence a text like Rojo's. In his native France, his lecture-turned-book *On Television* (1998) has become a measured sociological criticism of television in the free-market age that holds particular relevance in Mexico where the centrality of television is paramount. He writes: "Pushed by competition for marketshare, television networks have greater and greater recourse to the tried and true formulas of tabloid journalism..." (51). This observation clearly happened in Mexico with the *nota roja* at this time. Bourdieu takes the competitive pressure a step farther in its reach, asserting that an increased reliance upon ratings in television has a far-reaching effect that goes beyond its own media boundaries of broadcast television:

Through pressure from audience ratings, economic forces weigh on television, and through its effect on journalism, television weighs on newspapers and magazines, even the "purest" among them. The weight then falls on individual journalists, who little by little let themselves be drawn into television's orbit. In this way through the weight exerted by the journalistic field, the economy weighs on all fields of cultural production. (56)

Bourdieu asserts that television has come to affect nearly every sphere of journalism by its own increased pressure to garner, above all, higher ratings. Similarly, Rojo's writing most notably bears the imprint of television on his own literary production. In the case of Mexico in "Ruido gris," competitive ratings tied to news programming that actively looks to broadcast the sensationally violent events and images become not only central features of this new visuality but active agents of the visual reproduction of violence within society, as detailed below.

The creation of TV Azteca resulted in new kinds of programming that pegged ratings to violence in new ways. This television channel challenged the monopolistic practices that Televisa had enjoyed during 40 years of uncontested reign. In its first two years TV Azteca was unafraid to challenge the status quo and way the industry had hitherto functioned, distributing lower-cost programming and selling very low-rate advertisement (Hernández and McAnany 398), but it did not become an overnight sensation that challenged its competitor right away.⁷ It was not until August of 1995 that TV Azteca launched a reality news program that for the first time offered something different to the viewing public: *Ciudad Desnuda*. It "so unabashedly set out to report the everyday violence found in Mexico City that its producers claimed that 'blood would drip from the TV sets.' The show caught on quickly and in little over a year it was pulling ratings consistently in the high teens" (Ibid.).

Ciudad Desnuda bears a striking resemblance to *Rojo Digital*, the reality news program to which the protagonist in "Ruido gris" often contributes. In describing the opening sequence of the program's intro, the protagonist relates in layered detail the scenes that comprise it:

Hay una toma con mucho movimiento de un tiroteo en el centro de la ciudad, hasta que uno de los que están disparando voltea a ver a la cámara y aprieta el gatillo, la toma se sacude y parece que va cayendo al suelo. Todo empieza a inundarse de un líquido rojo que va llenando el lente. El ritmo empieza a acelerarse. Una toma desde el punto de vista de un conductor que choca contra un camión escolar. Una contrapicada de un sujeto que se avienta desde un edificio...El sacrificio de una vaca en un rastro. El asesinato de un político. Un accidente industrial donde un tipo pierde un brazo. Tomas de explosiones en las que incluso el reportero sale volando. Un secuestro en un avión, donde el terrorista dispara en la cabeza de un pasajero. Y así sucesivamente. (109)

These images of extreme violence continue to appear in such rapid succession that they begin to blur altogether in lines of red, yellow and grey colors that spin into a ball like fireworks until the explosion that converts the ball into the show's logo *Rojo Digital*. The comparison between the *Ciudad Desnuda*'s programming in which "blood would drip off the TV sets" and the opening scene to *Rojo Digital*, where violent images culminate into the diegetic blood slowly covering and then filling the screen, share an uncanny similarity. While it is unclear if the fictional *Rojo Digital* directly comments upon the actual *Ciudad Desnuda*, it seems highly likely that the fictional reality show critiques the plethora of programs that arose in response to real reality show's overwhelming success. After all, *Ciudad Desnuda* was not the only show of this kind but the one with the largest impact in terms of ratings. It also spawned a number of spin-offs both within Azteca and its competitor Televisa. These violently sensationalist reality-news programs became popular enough that by the first week of July in 1996, 31 hours were broadcast over 17 different shows throughout the open-air broadcast spectrum, all following the formula of the new flagship standard *Ciudad Desnuda* (Fadul n.p.). This included programs like *Historias de la calle*, *Rescate 911*, *Expediente 13/22:30: Cámara y delito*, *Primer impacto edición nocturna*, *Fuera de ley* (Hallín 36), among many others. In all, between 1995 and 1997 the audience for these shows grew by an astonishing 50%, reaching a fever pitch of popularity that brought high ratings for both Televisa and Azteca. By late 1997, president Zedillo called upon TV executives to moderate the violence of these programs, which resulted in the termination of both *Ciudad Desnuda* and *A sangre fría* shortly after (Casas Pérez 264).⁸ Nevertheless, "Ruido gris" was published in November of 1996, meaning Rojo wrote it amidst the surge of these programs. As such, it critiques such a heightened upswing in media violence by placing it center stage in the narrative and making the protagonist an active, integral player recording violent content as his profession and bearing the brunt of such pervasive media violence on his soul.

While one of the story's central concerns is the media violence of televised *nota roja* programs, Rojo's work also referenced contemporaneous events in more pointed ways. For example, the "asesinato de un político" of the narrated opening sequence of *Rojo Digital* very likely references the political assassination of Luis Donaldo Colosio on March 23rd, 1994 in Tijuana Mexico. Colosio was the chosen successor to Carlos Salinas and was campaigning for the following election in July when he was shot in a crowd in the neighborhood of Lomas Taurinas. Apart from the scandal this caused at the time in a JFK-like investigation that sought to ascertain the identity of the killer and accompanying conspiracy theories as to who committed the crime, part of the allure of this historical event is its having been recorded on video and broadcast and repeated countless numbers of times.

Volvían las imágenes amedrentadoras de ese asesinato sobre las que tantas veces había insistido...la televisión. La nebulosa de la muchedumbre en Tijuana—en el acto comicial y es ésa la última sonrisa de Colosio—, un brazo se extiende y apunta la pistola, el candidato del PRI cae. Fuera de foco, la falta de nitidez se combinaba con las flechas punteadas sobre la pantalla provocando una certeza extraña, pero que nadie discutía. Las secuencias del videoclip reconstituían el trayecto de la bala hasta incrustarse dentro de la cabeza. (158)

It is a quick, unassuming act of hyper-violence caught on camera whose repetition, as sociologist Esteban Vernik's observation reminds us, becomes one of its prominent features. Due to this repetition, it is as if the video image itself has taken on a life of its own, just as certain images the ocular reporter sees and records repeat thousands of times in his memory in Rojo's story. After capturing a suicide on video for the first time, he comments: "Yo regresé a mi casa y esa noche observé varias veces la grabación personal que había hecho. Cada acción sucedió miles de veces en mi monitor" (97). Later, while describing live broadcast of another ocular journalist tortured and killed at the hands of his kidnappers: "Inmovilizaron su cabeza y conectaron su retina al monitor. He visto miles de veces esas imágenes" (107). The link between the representation of a real-life assassination and the imagined violent acts in "Ruido gris" is in their excessive repetition. This recorded sequence becomes lodged in the brain of the spectator because the images upon which the television kept repeatedly insisting—returns once and again to be seen.

By dint of the excessive repetition of the televisual images here, "Ruido gris" impels the reader to consider what the near future may evolve into if the present conditions continue. But like all enduring tales of science fiction, its commentary upon the present moment in which it was written reveals its true critical potential. In this case, the complex interplay of forces within neoliberal Mexico catalyzed an increase in competition, a heightened reliance upon the ratings as a marker of popularity and ad revenue, and ultimately provided the ideal conditions under which a surge arose in reality-news television programs specializing in ultraviolent content.

Punto cero

If "Ruido gris" proposes several pointed critiques of a heightened tele-visual sphere in Mexico and spends most of its narration outside in the public spaces of the social, his novel *Punto cero* shifts its space toward the private, interior place of home. In so doing, it explores some of the more psychological facets to televisuality. Published in 2000 and republished in 2012, *Punto cero* remains Rojo's only novel written to date. According to the author, one significant reason it found enough audience to be republished was that the key narrative event, a "virtual kidnapping," presaged the actual virtual kidnappings that are believed to have begun in Mexico around 2001, a year after the novel was first published. These events, made possible largely due to cellular telephone technology, increased dramatically toward the end of the 2000 decade, affecting thousands of families and individuals throughout Mexico.⁹ Beyond this fact, *Punto cero* continues to bear witness to the importance of television in 1990s Mexico by foregrounding televisuality in the narrative, making it at once its central thematic preoccupation and a source of its rhetorical innovation. Delving deeper into the articulations made within the novel, we see several specific critiques: that television creates—rather than reports—social reality, that consumer society has attained a new level of pervasiveness in Mexico, and that the body and subjectivity have become

fundamentally dis-located by the presence of television. Following the novel's proposals on subjectivity, my analysis here will employ a reading of several key events in the novel via the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. The main reason for this approach lies in the fact that Lacan has exerted extraordinary influence upon Rojo, as Andrea Bell points out in her biographical entry on Rojo in *Latin American Science Fiction Writers: A to Z* (181), a claim that is further fortified by the fact that he married a Lacanian psychoanalyst in Tijuana. Even the novel's title itself owes its existence to a quote that Rojo paraphrases from Lacan: "El punto cero, según Jacques Lacan, es el punto entre nuestros ojos donde se sitúa la función de borde y el corte que hace que nuestra mirada sea nuestra. Así se mira hacia afuera mirando hacia adentro. Es siempre un punto ciego donde no se sabe quién está viendo" (3). This epigraph sketches out the position of the subject in the dialectic of human visual perception, and it does so by locating the psychological experience of seeing as something that is primarily structured by a process exterior to the subject—the gaze the emanates from the other. In the novel, it is television that becomes a stand-in for the powerful gaze that is outside the subject. While it is true that it is traditionally thought that we gaze at a television screen, Rojo suggests that our gazing at television is similar to the subjective processes evident in the formation of identity via Lacan's mirror stage.

The story centers on Ray Domínguez, a young twenty-something in a huge city who has just moved out of his affluent parents' house for the first time. Ray moves into his new apartment only find out that, according to a television news program, he was kidnapped earlier that morning at the bank. Despite never explicitly naming the city, the narrator refers to it early on as "la ciudad más grande del mundo" (11). This, coupled with the fact that media report the kidnapping to have occurred at Banco de México, clearly makes Mexico City the setting of the story. Along with a small group of his friends who visit him early in the novel, they categorically deny the news broadcast on television. Still, the captors demand ransom and his father refuses to pay it, and Ray rather inexplicably decides not to tell the authorities or even leave his apartment. Shortly after, he goes into the bathroom and mysteriously experiences a brutal beating, as if he is being pulverized by an invisible aggressor: a sudden strike to his back makes him fall the ground, an electric surge races across his arm, and finally he feels his hand being crushed as if it were placed between two bricks and stepped on with the weight of someone's entire body. But there is no other body in the bathroom except his own. His hand contorts and blood trickles forth from freshly opened wounds. This traumatic event without explanation further confounds the situation, seeming to corroborate the television reports that he has been kidnapped—despite the fact that he is still living in his apartment and is certain that he has not been kidnapped. Several weeks after the event, the television news reports the kidnappers have set a deadline for the ransom, if by which they have not received the ransom they will kill Ray. The story's climax culminates with a countdown that eventually "disappears" Ray into the television screen—and out of his apartment.

Television pervades, influences and even determines the narrative such that we might even say that televisuality inhabits the entire book. From beginning to end, televisual signs appear throughout the text, as in video remote-control symbols for *fast-forward* ">>" or *pause* "|", etc., which precede and interpolate larger sub-sections in the story; dialogues from commercials, programs and news shows very frequently intrude into the narrative to become part of it, and at times spoken words from the television become indistinguishable from the narrations' third-person omniscient descriptions of the protagonist's thoughts. A number of sections attempt to mimic the experience of watching television or, on occasion, *zapping* (rapidly changing channels very frequently), resulting in a seemingly incoherent pastiche of dialogue and description, separated only by the word "Click." With these elements considered together, the televisualization of the

text results in a blending of narrative form with disparate and fragmented discourses proper to television genres. It attempts, likely more than any novel from Mexico, to mimic, absorb and even remediate the discursive sounds, signs and symbols proper to the televisual. Most importantly, television is the anchor of narrative tension throughout: the plot's forward arc culminates into a kind of vortex that inexorably pulls the protagonist towards it, eventually and climactically sucking him wholly into the television screen and thus televisual space itself¹⁰; he becomes literally consumed by the screen within the narrative. Televisual space becomes an all-consuming actant in *Punto cero*, a point which foregrounds the transformational power of television on subjectivity. Consistent with "Ruido gris", the subjectivity put forth by this novel steadfastly remains one that is not only powerfully mediated by television by ultimately determined by it.

From the novel's opening narrated scenes to the plot's culminating fantastic end, the televisual as experienced by Ray becomes, above all else, the site of a severe misidentification that seemingly negates his own individually-lived reality. In other words, what he sees upon the television screen ultimately reflects a truer reality than the one he lives out in his own apartment. This is most clearly articulated by the story's description of his kidnapping early on, just after he moves into his apartment and his friend Mauricio calls him to tell him to quickly turn on the TV and watch the news.

Ray se siente como un títere, quiere gritarle a la pantalla. Se ve a sí mismo, y no recuerda nada. Su réplica sale de la toma. Se descubre torpe, indefenso. Ajeno. *El nombre de la víctima es Raymundo Domínguez*, la foto de Ray llena la pantalla, hijo del conocido empresario industrial Arturo Domínguez. Ray se frota los ojos. A él no le pasó eso, y sin embargo, sería el primero en hacer una identificación positiva de sí mismo. (9)

As expressed here, Ray feels so distanced from the person that the television news displays upon the screen that he describes it as alien. It is an identification in that he recognizes himself and, at the same time, it is a misidentification in that he sees the television image of himself as a replica, an other. We should remember that this odd, seemingly fantastic proposition is exactly what Jacques Lacan posits when he states that "I is an other" (Lacan: 2006 96), implying that the very notion of identity that a subject feels comes not from some innate, indissoluble sense of unique individual-ness but rather is a complex matrix of language and imagery that is essentially exterior to the psychic interior of the subject. In this sense, Ray's identification and simultaneous misidentification of his on-screen image reflects a common process that the human subject experiences on a constant basis (according to Lacan), and one which Rojo links strongly to the image identifications on television. Whereas the French psychoanalyst speaks about the gaze that determines the subject being fundamentally outside, Rojo substitutes the television for the gaze.

The novel frames Ray as a split tele-visual subject a la Lacan. Ray, as previously discussed, manifests a split subjectivity in his misidentification of the projected *imago* on the television screen and his dis-located body; he is a split televisual subjectivity, and numerous other instances in the novel attest to this. After Ray forces his friends out of his apartment and he resolves to do nothing, he turns on the television to watch a news segment about his kidnapping where he, his father, a kidnapper's voice, some old friends and coworkers that knew him make up a news piece that is narrated by a reporter. When he turns off the television, the novel's narrator reveals Ray's reaction as looks at the empty screen: "Su primera reacción había sido desconfiar. Pero la certeza del reconocimiento, esa trampa lógica que provoca la identificación en el espejo, en cualquier reflejo,

se había arrastrado entre sus pensamientos y no había poder humano que lograra exiliarla” (62). Here, Rojo references the so-called mirror stage as described by Lacan whereby a baby sees his/her image returned in a mirror and identifies his/her self positively as corresponding to that image. This has a litany of effects in subject formation, such as it “situates the agency of the ego...in a fictional direction [...]” (Lacan: 2006 76). It is fictional because the baby—and later on, adult—is never simply that reflected image whole (Gestalt), that *specular I* that is seen exterior to the baby early on, but rather much more fragmented and partial within his/her psychic experience. Thus, recognition of one’s self as one’s image is also, simultaneously, a misrecognition. In doing so, the subject undergoes a continual process of a double movement that asserts the “mental permanence of the I” as well as prefiguring “its alienating destination” (Ibid.). This double move, then, produces a double: the person who looks into the mirror and identifies his or her imago (the *specular I*) with being who they think they are (the *social I*), an event that is reasserted and maintained as the baby grows and enters the symbolic (i.e., learns language) and is told how he is and who he is by his parents as well as others.

In spite of this fictional direction that the subject’s ego identity takes, for Lacan there is an elemental discordance within the core of the human subject’s psychic experience such that it can never be or feel whole. This alteration at the core of the organism is caused by “dehiscence” (Ibid. 78), a medical term Lacan borrows to refer to a gaping, a rupture or a splitting open, as in a surgical wound, that occurs in the subject. This is the Lacanian real erupting and breaking through. In terms of the character Ray, after he falls into “esa trampa lógica que provoca la identificación en el espejo” during the news segment about his kidnapping, he then reflects upon his parents and the spectacle that is being made of his life:

Las heridas en su mano todavía no cicatrizaban, y de hecho parecía sangrar un poco más. La mención de su nombre o la aparición de su rostro en la televisión parecía excitarlas, y se abrían un poco más para mostrar, orgullosas, la carne viva que pulsaba bajo la epidermis. Alguien estaba sufriendo y Ray no sabía quién. No había límite que mostrar dónde acababa él y dónde empezaba lo que decían de él en la televisión. Sólo estaban las heridas en su mano, sangrando lentamente, el golpe en la mandíbula y en la espalda punzando como recordatorio de lo frágil de su posición, su identidad y valor. (63)

What the spectator Ray then experiences here is a radical (and narratively literal) splitting of his subjectivity such that the *specular I*, or the reflective image of his whole body that he sees and recognizes on the screen, becomes so associated with the *social I* the news report collects and broadcasts of him that it becomes difficult for him to deny that it is him on the screen. His body after the beating experiences an intense dehiscence with regard to his wounds that seem to respond to the psychic experience of Ray watching the news broadcast of himself. The wounds in his flesh, or the real in Lacanian terms, seem to come alive, announce themselves and split further open. There are other traces of Lacan in the text that support this position, such as later when the narrator describes Ray alone in his apartment watching the rapidly changing images that cross the screen: “Ese vacío que llamamos individuo. Ahí estás tú, Ray” (69). Here the primordial feature of Rojo’s main character is that of lack; he is a blank subject that is constituted by and composed of images that come from the television. Nowhere is this more apparent than when he falls asleep at night watching television, and the narrator describes the broadcast image of the grey static-effect screen that occurs when it no longer receives a signal.

La luz encuentra forma en la silueta de Ray, lo construye y define sus límites, inventa un cuerpo que parece emerger de unas cajas, le da forma a sus ojos, sombra a sus labios y una expresión de tranquilidad a su rostro sin cesar de moverse un segundo. La luz del monitor inventa a Ray. Su piel es estática; él es la pantalla. (Ibid.)

This particular description underscores one chief difference between filmic and televisual spectatorship: the source of light. As Anne Friedberg pointed out, unlike in the cinema where the screen receives the light from the projector, with television the screen itself is a source of light (136). *Punto cero* literalizes this key component of contemporary spectatorship occurring in Mexico to signal the importance of the televisual image at this time.

By considering how these changing practices of spectatorship may they affect the subject, Rojo constructs in Ray a Lacanian subject whose split becomes manifest in the screen of the television that broadcasts his life. The novel repeatedly stresses throughout the ineluctable draw of the television image—that the images it displays hold more truth in identity than the subject's lived experience. While it is unlikely many media scholars would agree with this radical assertion, I would argue that the importance of this novel lies in its placing television as central to its fantastic premise and narrative structure. In so doing it insists on the centrality of television in Mexico's culture industries as a potentially deceptive instrument in interpellating subjects.

“El presidente sin órganos”

The final short story analyzed here as part of Rojo's speculative fiction is “El presidente sin órganos.” It employs a mixture of the journalistic registers proper to newspapers and television media in a format that at times looks and feels like newspaper article or television script¹¹ while also explicitly commenting on contemporary politics; it straddles the generic boundaries between a loose political satire of an unnamed Mexican president with a setting and tone that enters most closely the science fictional subgenre of slipstream.¹² The strangeness evoked in this story results from the peculiar mixture of the president's diagnosis of rectal cancer that spreads throughout his body and the transformation of this event into a mass media spectacle by broadcasting the intestinal surgery throughout the nation. The story succinctly narrates these events in page-long sections each prefaced by a date that is succeeded by another one month later. In total, seven months elapse from the time of diagnosis, the decline in the president's health and finally to his death, where the story closes.

The story begins with a date, Miércoles 13 de marzo, as follows: “Me siento muy halagado’, dijo el Presidente cuando recibió la noticia de que el mejor equipo de cirujanos se encargaría de extirpar el absceso de grasa que se ha formado en su recto y que ha provocado su extraño comportamiento en los últimos meses” (9). As such, the narrative voice here remains in an omniscient third person in this first section. It follows, like all the dated sections, with one-off characters who have something happen to them that in some way, however tangential, relates to the reported events of the president. In this first section, for example, Lucas Rivero realizes that his feeling ill as of late could be related to his own intestines. This suggests a link between a media report of the president that psychosomatically affects viewers of the news that reports it. The tale never returns to the brief introduction of this character and his illness.

The narrative intermixes throughout different media registers with the more standard, third

person omniscient voice. The first verifiable mention of news occurs after the appearance of the character Lucas Rivero on the next date, “Jueves 14 de abril.” It continues with all capitals, “EL PRESIDENTE YA NO TIENE PELOS EN LA LENGUA,” (10), indicating that this is the headline to a newspaper story. From here, the narration begins to jump from reading the rapid flash of a headline, to the third person focalization of the narrator describing the announcement, to finally, the speech of a newscaster, placing the reader in front of a news broadcast. These drastic switches in narrative voice carry a similar effect to *Punto cero* when Ray sits in his apartment and watches television changing channels frequently—mimicking the nonlinear effect of zapping with narratively disorienting results. One apt correlative to this effect is *Homo Zapping*, effectively described by Gustavo Martínez Pandiani, a consultant of political marketing and electoral strategy in his book of the same name. For the television spectator who prefers to observe continual fragmented images from television, he observes multiple consequences to the critical capacity of such a viewer.

Las actitudes y características de esta figura que favorece la consolidación de la televisión como principal arena de la política son las siguientes: carece de disciplina receptiva, evitando el razonamiento y el análisis detallado; prefiere las impresiones veloces y fragmentadas, presentando poca disposición a interpretar y sistematizar ideas; no está dispuesto a hacer grandes esfuerzos para descifrar los mensajes que recibe; busca sensaciones cortas y de alto impacto emotivo; consume imágenes antes que contenidos. (qtd. in Sánchez Gudiño 47)

Spectators consume a stream of rapidly moving audio-visual images, often stereotyped and insufficiently contextualized to offer enough information from which to construct well-informed comprehensively considered meaning from these images. Pandiani suggests that viewers like this arise particularly in an era when the political has become subordinated to the format of the televisual. This spectator subject acts to avoid ideological polemics and prefers political scandal and personality confrontations, which television offers abundantly at the expense of the former. It comes as no surprise, then, when in a following section of Rojo’s story, the president finds himself immersed in a scandal, providing the perfect environment for media spectacle. Pictures circulate of the president and his daughter in what appears to be sexual games, and a denial of the accusations is declared, with the president stating that the pictures have been misconstrued. His strong and intimate relationship with his daughter has only had the best interests of the nation in mind, he says, providing evidence of how consultations with her have resulted in resolving pressing economic issues for the government.

This aforementioned sequence ends by channeling a television news story, making the first moment when televisual discourse enters and interrupts the third-person omniscient voice. Following the announcement of the scandal, a breaking-news television news program interrupts to announce the president’s sudden collapse from a nervous breakdown. “El Presidente tuvo un colapso nerviosos hace cinco minutos. Se desconocen las causas. No cambie de canal y lo mantendremos informado” (11). This scandal-turned-personal-drama, suddenly shifting into mimicking a televised mode, acts as a sudden yet unassuming intrusion into the story’s structure. Given the emulation of media registers in print journalism and the short, economic descriptions from the narrative voice, the entrance of television discourse blends in smoothly. Still, it leaves the reader with the question of which media s/he is reading.

These interruptions occur numerous times in the story, and ultimately overtake the

narrative which ends upon the news broadcast that announces the president's demise.

El país está de luto. El Presidente ha muerto. Viva el Presidente. En la próxima hora tendremos entrevistas, comentarios y una semblanza de la vida de nuestro fallecido Presidente....Los especialistas se preparan para realizar la autopsia. Se buscarán causas de deceso místico-religiosas, sicológicas, extraterrestres y fisiológicas. Todos los especialistas firmaron contratos de exclusividad con esta emisora para la transmisión en vivo de las operaciones. Sólo sintonizándonos tendrá usted la información completa. El Presidente ha muerto. Viva el Presidente. (15-16)

The story ends with not simply with the president's death but its media broadcast, which cements the story's televised nature. What starts out as a traditionally told story with the occasional interruptions from discourses of print newspapers and television broadcast is ultimately overcome by the televisual voiceovers. The reader remains, as in *Punto cero*, in a televisual space whose physical coordinates are nowhere in particular in Mexico and yet everywhere a television might reside.

The president upon which the story hinges alludes to a characterized version of a figure akin to Vicente Fox, who had been in power for several years when Rojo penned the work. The rectal tumor that starts the story frames him as a tragic-comic character: "Es difícil estar sentado sobre una pelota de pin-pong insertada en mi trasero," (9) he says, always with a smile for the cameras. A month later, the tumor found in his mouth results in the headline: "EL PRESIDENTE YA NO TIENE PELOS EN LA LENGUA" (10). Clearly, these news reports also deliver a dose of humor by implying that the president's rectal abscess causes him to be literally "full of shit" and that to not have "pelos en la lengua" means that he is able to speak straightforwardly—for the first time in a long while. The sex scandal, which is never resolved within the story, becomes overshadowed by his nervous breakdown and quickly forgotten, never returning again to the narrative. By August, the doctor recovers from yet another surgery for the cancer that is slowly eating away at his body, and before the cameras are let into the hospital room during his recovery, he makes them all pause: "el Presidente, siempre cuidadoso de su aspecto, pidió que lo dejaran a solas con su maquillista" (14). The very next day, it is revealed the president has been unable to obtain an erection in the past three years, and since he has fathered four girls, the idea leaving a male legacy appeals to him greatly. The First Lady decides to make the sacrifice and offers to lie bedridden for months while geneticists attempt to secure sperm from the president in spite of his impotence. The criticism of these remarks frame the supreme seat of power in Mexico—the presidential office—as one that is corrupted physically by cancer, corroded by scandal and exhausted from its immense pressure. He is rendered powerless by this whole process, surrounded by cameras and newspaper journalists that hang upon his every word and highly procured image.

The emphasis in "El presidente sin órganos" upon a celebrity president is no accident. Media critic Hugo Sánchez Gudiño documented the rise of what he has termed the *mediocracia* (also called the *telecracia* or *videocracia*) where the macro-concentration of power of the media industry has effectively subordinated the state power to the will of the industry. "La idea compartida por los estudiosos de la política y de los medios," he states, "es que la operatividad de los medios, especialmente la televisión, han generado la disolución de lo político; esto es, la conversión de la política en espectáculo, con todos sus protagonistas." Vicente Fox is, according to Sánchez Gudiño, a *presidente mediático*—the first in Mexico—for a plethora of reasons. Following the basic theory of Italian political scientist Giovanni Sartori that television results in

conditioning the political to discourses of affect, and that the culture of the image gives primacy to the visible, Sánchez Gudiño documents an extensive array of media agents, actors and events that typified Fox's *sexenio*. This period ushered in an impressive increase in the media presence of politicians and political life in two major ways: i) the historic increase in *mercadotecnia política* (political marketing) that has become the hegemonic standard of communication, and which has diminished—if not outright abolished—previous political discourse that took place in the public sphere, and ii) an unprecedented rise in the importance of *videoescándalos* to politicians, particularly that which eliminated the promising rise of Andrés López Obrador as a legitimate contender for his succession against Felipe Calderón for the following *sexenio*. These elements have qualitatively changed the nature of political discourse, underpinned by mass media.

Sánchez Gudiño joins numerous other media critics from Mexico in signaling that Fox's term was coterminous with a qualitative change in how political power functions in this era. Jinaro Vilamil's book *El sexenio de Televisa* further documents the rise of power in Televisa under Calderón's term, and later he portrays Peña Nieto as fundamentally a *telepresidente*. In this sense, Rojo's story can be read as prefiguring what comes after Fox, particularly in the sense that the television media broadcast of the president becomes his most salient feature. Media scholar Raul Trujo Delarbe has gone so far as to challenge Jesús Martín Barbero's long-standing claim of the power that, over time, the tendency goes *de los medios a las mediaciones*, indicating that there exists an enduring dialectic between media institutions and those that actively interpret it and help to shape its future content by the power of consumer demand. Trujo Delarbe inverts Martín Barbero's claim, stating these are times of *mediocracia sin mediaciones* (192), indicating that in this period the power of mass media institutions are instrumental—determining even—in the manufacture of political power. In this sense, the academic character in Rojo's story, Heriberto Néstor, presciently states in deliver a conference talk that “la política es la vanguardia de la ficción” (10). Indeed, this holds some truth in relation to Rojo's own story.

By virtue of plotting the story in such a way as making the president ultimately an affective media phenomenon mired in scandal and spectacle, Pepe Rojo perceived and satirized some transformations that some media scholars in Mexico have since recognized as being particular to Mexico and its politics at the turn of the 21st century and continue to this day.

In sum, the most striking commonality from these three fantastical narratives, all written from 1996 to 2003, is that collectively they respond to changes that occurred in the political, economic and social areas of a neoliberal Mexico in the 1990s and early 2000s. Drawing inspiration from some paradigmatic transformations in the way the media industries function, Rojo's speculative literature absorbs these variations and offers an assortment of critical articulations on fundamental ways in which visuality and vision in Mexico have undergone modifications. In “Ruido gris,” his most accomplished short story to date, a powerful mass media company pays for an operation that converts the protagonist into an ocular journalist, obligating him to work for them six hours per day, seven days per week. The system of ratings, privatization of media channels, increased competition and surge in violent *nota roja* broadcasts put forth the idea that media in this era are primer movers in the business of exploitation and media violence. In *Punto cero*, his fantastic novel from the year 2000, television underlies the narrative to such an extent that its generic convention meld with the written word, at once a source for its thematic preoccupation and rhetorical innovation. Rojo proposes a Lacanian split subject that is fundamentally dislocated and misrecognized in its identity formation via television, portraying this media as alluring and deceptive. In “El presidente sin órganos,” Rojo perceives the increased

proliferation and circulation of politicians and their image in mass media to such a degree that the image overtakes the narrative, even—maybe especially—in death.

What emerges as a whole through these narratives is that his characters' bodies become largely synonymous with Mexico's social body, which in the 1990s was greatly penetrated and overtaken by a heavily mediatized social space. They also corroborate how the symbolic production of fantastic literature remains not only a legitimate but vibrant source through which to think through these alterations within the visual sphere.

Notes

¹ This article is part of a larger investigation regarding the representation of visual technologies in Mexico's speculative fiction produced between 1993 and 2008. I use the term "speculative fiction" in a unique way from Robert Heinlein's original attempt in the late 1950s to re-name science fiction in order to foreground the hypothetical nature of the writing. Nor is it an attempt to distinguish this literature of a higher quality from the oft-derided marker that carries "science fiction," as is sometimes the case (e.g., J. Andrew Brown's analysis in *Cyborgs in Latin America* 2010). My usage of the term attempts to recover its "speculative" etymological roots in order to reveal one aspect of what has been lost in its current meaning: the origin of the adjective "speculative" varies from "speculation," and has its roots in two Latin terms: *speculari*, which means "to observe," and *specere*, which means "to look at" or "view." These evolved into the Old French *speculacion*, meaning "careful observation with intense attention," and then into one of its current meanings based on the notion of "intelligent contemplation; act of looking" (Harper n.p.). These two signifieds accentuate the relevance of the use of the term for the larger study. Speculative as both contemplative and observing or looking highlights the focus on the reflective nature that these texts suggest regarding how visuality operates and is changing more generally in contemporary Mexico. Additionally, the creative texts treated here fall under different genres: the fantastic, science fiction and a subgenre slipstream, all of which share in common strange and alienating aspects of tele-vision.

² These are the original published dates of these stories. "Ruido gris" was republished in 2012 along with other stories from Rojo's 1998 compilation *Yonke*; *Punto cero* was also republished by the same publisher in 2012 in an updated edition. "El presidente sin órganos" was originally published in Rojo's 2009 *interrupciones*, although, according to the author, it was written in 2003. The citations here come from the republished versions and not the originals.

³ This term is not to be confused with John Caldwell's appropriation of it in his 1995 book (also called *Televisuality*) to describe a characteristic excess of style proper to US television starting in the 1980s. Nor does it share affinities with William Nericcio's *Eyegiene: Permutations of Subjectivity in the Televisual Age of Sex and Race* (2014), a work which focuses on exotified and eroticized images of the Latino other that circulate in media within the United States.

⁴ As several photos that I have come across reveal, televisions have—in a literal sense—become a part of Tijuana's material foundation that is unique to the city. In one example, they have become solidified into the landscape by placing discarded television sets in a staggered, diagonal fashion to become makeshift steps. There also exist photos of Pepe Rojo observing local artist Fernando Miranda's outdoor installation comprised entirely of found material in the city, with a central component being television screens hung in multiples rows of two that constitute much of the façade of the work.

⁵ See Florence Touissant's *Televisión sin fronteras* (1998) for an accomplished treatment of the phenomenon.

⁶ The selling of this company included two open-air channels, 13 and 7, 169 stations and theatre chains (Hernández and McAnany 394), paving the way for Televisión Azteca to form. TV Azteca's owner Ricardo Salinas Pliego set an ambitious goal to reach 24% of the ad market within four years of operation. By 1997, only three years later, it was able to surpass that and achieve 31% (Sutter 24), which is quite an impressive figure given that Televisa had gone virtually unchallenged since its inception as a company in 1955 (under the name Telesistema Mexicano).

⁷ As Hernandez and McAnany mention, the ideological atmosphere in Mexico at the time created the perfect opportunity for TV Azteca to challenge and gain market share. For one, it provided news that was deemed credible insofar as it was simply an alternative to Televisa, whose ties to the government have notoriously been strong. It has

often been seen as the main propaganda source for the State going back years. This tie between the company and the State was in no way secretive, given that Televisa's president Emilio Azcárraga once stated publicly that "yo soy un soldado del PRI" (Toussaint 113). Given the government's engagement with the Zapatista uprising in 1994, the coverage on behalf of Televisa was considered "so one-sided in its pro-government stance that it shocked an audience already accustomed to biased reporting into buying record numbers of newspapers and magazines" (Hernandez and McAnany 397). Despite public distrust of Televisa's news reports, TV Azteca's own news program *Hechos* still garnered low ratings from the moment of its purchase for two years, due in large measure to the fact that channels 13 and 7 were once government owned and operated and consequently the stigma attached to them persisted.

⁸ It is worth noting that the intervention only affected the aforementioned surge of programs in 1997 and by no means did this terminate all *nota roja* broadcasts of such violent reality programs. They still exist in open-air television in Mexico today.

⁹ A virtual kidnapping, also called telephonic extortion, consists of the criminal dialing a telephone number, often at random, and the person who picks up the phone hears a voice, usually a minor, screaming for help. The victim in a panic usually says the name of his or her son or daughter out loud, and the extortion begins, after the victim believes that their son or daughter has been kidnapped when in reality they have never even met the kidnappers. The ransom amount requested varies from as low as 500 pesos up to 20,000 dollars. The turnaround time is usually quick and minimizes the risk on the behalf of the criminal. In the year 2001, only 10 cases were reported, but in 2007 that figure reached as many as 10,000 (Amescua Chávez 116). The "virtual" aspect to this event is facilitated by leveraging the anonymity of a telephone call to make the victim believe a loved one has been kidnapped and demands ransom to be saved. However, this is not the case of *Punto cero*, where the virtuality of the kidnapping occurs on television and not in the subjective experience of the protagonist who has reportedly been kidnapped.

¹⁰ Anne Friedberg and Raiford Guns propose that "Televisual space is both the space of the televisual and the changes produced by the televisual to space itself," (131) thus extending the definition of simply locating where television is watched to the ways in which the space becomes transformed by the actions, uses and meanings that it brings to those spaces.

¹¹ Rojo also employed this technique in "Conversaciones con Yoni Rei" (1998), but the inclusion of an analysis of this story is not included due to space limitations.

¹² The American cyberpunk darling Bruce Sterling coined the term, stating that slipstream "is a kind of writing which simply makes you feel very strange; the way that living in the twentieth century makes you feel, if you are a person of a certain sensibility" (N.p.). It has since been commonly accepted to use the term of a "fiction of strangeness" that, more than adhering to a strict genre definition, pertains to a literary effect of producing said strangeness.

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