

**DR. B**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*“Dr. B.”* is a portrait that reflects on the documentary process by focusing on the life of Juan Blechen (the Dr.), a charming 72-year-old Mexican-American, self-appointed warrior who idealizes indigenous Mexican cultures. The film crew’s interactions with the Dr. put on display the anatomy of toxic masculinities present in Mexican culture.

The film offers a dynamic familiar to the non-fiction filmmaking process where subject and filmmaker struggle/clash to gain control over how the character is being seen and will be seen; on how the identity of the subject is self-created, perceived by others and then captured by camera and microphone to be used in an audiovisual product ultimately consumed by an audience.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## INTRODUCTION

“*Dr. B.*” is a 40-minute self-reflexive portrait revealing the interplay between subject and filmmaker during the making of a documentary film. It is, at its core, a reflection of the filmmaking process itself, something that American film historian and scholar Paul Arthur refers to as “meta- or unmaking of”<sup>1</sup> a sub-genre of making-of documentaries characterized by the inclusion of a reflection about its own making. The process of my York thesis film began with an impulse to explore positive depictions of my cultural identity. I am Mexican and during my life I have always been fascinated by how Mexicans are perceived beyond our borders. Juan Blechen Nieto (the Dr.) appeared to me as almost a perfect example of positive Mexican identity, with a discourse that resonated in me as necessary for the well-being of Mexican youth. But during the filmmaking process that image started to blur, and what was once positive revealed itself to be very problematic. This transformed the film. It forced me into a self-reflexive position and required the inclusion of the film’s crew as active characters within the film as a means of expressing my own concerns about the subject we were portraying.

Documentary filmmaker Heddy Honigmann had said in interviews that loving her characters is what makes her work possible. I had sought a lovable character while choosing the subject for my directorial debut as a documentary filmmaker, but the process of making the film made me ask myself: what if I fall out of love with my subject during the process? Should I stop the process altogether? What is my duty as a filmmaker?

This document answers these questions by detailing the unexpected findings that I

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Arthur. “Extreme Makeover: the changing face of documentary,” *Cineaste*, issue 3, volume 30 (2005): page 21.

encountered during the making of the film, while also connecting them to my own creative approach. Throughout, I will address the relationship between the process of creative decision-making and the ethical implications present in documentary filmmaking by creating an informed chronicle of the events and thoughts that led me to formally shape “*Dr. B.*” It is important to mention that this support document does not pretend to articulate the film’s structure, but rather, to provide the reader with tools to understand the train of thought that guided the film to completion.

“*Dr. B.*” is an answer to my interaction with the subject and the viewer. I bring attention in the film to the techniques of visual storytelling to confront and engage the audience: the use of formal interviews in contrast with performative scenes and making-of moments, my choice of music to underline my shifting relationship with the subject, cutting directly to images or scenes for out-of-context associations, and the use of voice-over as reactions to events and revelations.

This supporting document for “*Dr. B.*” delves into transversal themes that had an impact on the development of the project, and take readers through my journey of making the film. I will bring attention to the themes and questions that were not necessarily present at the beginning of the process but appeared, some in unexpected ways, during the making of the film. Such themes and questions are: is it possible to capture reality as it unfolds in a project of this nature? Why did my character present himself to me as a “Mexican warrior” and what does he gain from presenting himself as such? How is the impact of gender violence in Mexico important to any understanding of the subject? What is my (and the crew’s) appropriate response when our ethics are confronted by unfolding events? And how can the connection between subject and filmmaker be communicated to an audience in a way that has an impressionistic impact?

## CHAPTER 1: GENESIS OF MY YORK THESIS FILM

*“If you know what you’ll do in advance, then you won’t do it.” - Frank Gehry*

### 1.1 The Failure of Evaristo

“*Dr. B.*” as my thesis project was born out of the failure of a different project. In October 2015, I was determined to do a portrait of a Mexican martial artist. I was driven by my passion for both Mexican national identity politics and martial arts, where this identity politics was finding an unlikely expression, and I saw these both as a way to shape human behaviour in Mexico into something righteous. My character at the time was Evaristo Arteaga, a 78-year-old Mexican sensei (martial arts master). Unfortunately, after one year of development, Evaristo’s family denied me access to his story for fear of me finding out a “dark spot” in his past. This incident took place in December 2016; I was already in production, and already four months into being enrolled in York’s MFA film production program.

Around this time I discovered the Dr. in a documentary short-film called *Encadenar la Rabia*, a film my cinematographer J. Alejandro Trejo had shot. *Encadenar la Rabia* became my reference for Mexican martial arts and their impact in underprivileged communities in Mexico and in this film the Dr. was credited as a “traditional kung-fu instructor.” I can honestly say that I was captivated by him and his on-camera speech: “We have (as Mexicans) enough wealth for our people to rise above injustice with great pride, but our youth has lost its roots, values and self-esteem. Knowledge gives us self-esteem, martial arts forge us as true warriors, and this is what Mexico needs: to form young warriors that pacify and help their communities.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *Encadenar la Rabia*. Directed by Oscar Muñoz (2012). Film.

I met the Dr. during the last days of December 2016 in Temixco, a small city two hours south of Mexico City, where he was introduced to me as “Dr. Blechen” by sensei Armando Mercado, the director of Evolution Martial Arts Academy (a kick-boxing academy devoted to help underprivileged youth). The meeting felt like a casting session, and the Dr. quickly made a case for why should I make my documentary about him. He had seen *Encadenar la Rabia* and was eager to have a similar documentary made with him as the main subject. I was intrigued by the Dr. because he was telling me what I wanted to hear: “Mexico needs warriors and warriors can be forged through martial arts and the knowledge of our ancestral culture.” After a couple of days, it became clear to me that the Dr. was a character worth following; he was articulate and fascinating to me. I named the new proposal for my York thesis film *Mexica* because I realized that I wanted to explore in my work what it is to be a contemporary Mexica warrior. What did the Dr. mean by this? Is he a Mexica Warrior? I thought he was and I thought I could become one by understanding him.

## **1.2 Mexica Warrior**

When looking for references to define the word Mexica, I found that it can easily be misinterpreted because it has been incorrectly used as a generic term to describe a broad spectrum of indigenous communities that inhabited Mexico before and after the Spanish conquest of the territory, while also, the term Mexica has been used to refer to specific communities around the Mexican territory. One can find that the terms Aztec and Mexica are colloquially used as synonyms, but both have different meanings. Aztec is a broader term that refers to an Empire integrated by a group of civilizations in Mexico that had their origins in the legendary place called Aztlán: all these populations spoke/speak Nahuatl language. The Aztec



peoples include the Chichimecas, Xochimilcas and amongst others, the Mexicas.<sup>3</sup> To be specific, Mexica is the self-appointed name of the ancestral inhabitants of Mexico City. They were the inhabitants of Tenochtitlán, the capital of the Aztec Empire, a city built on an island in Texcoco lake in the 14th century that is currently located in Downtown Mexico City. The name Mexica stayed in use due to the chronicles from conquerors such as Hernán Cortés in his letters to Carlos I de España, the Spanish King during the conquest of Mexico. Cortés used to refer to the people of Tenochtitlan as “los Mexicas” (the Mexicas), “los de México” (Mexico’s), and “los Mexicanos” (the Mexicans).<sup>4</sup>

The Dr. is a promoter of a nationalistic ideology that identifies as Mexica. For him, it is important that Mexican youth reconnect with their ancestral cultures to regain the Mexican indigenous identity almost obliterated during the Spanish conquest, more than five hundred years ago, and systematically erased in the context of globalization. When I first heard the word “Mexica” coming from the Dr. it functioned as a trigger for my own desire to connect with an ancestral national identity. My primary references were from high school Mexican history classes where I would study the greatness of the Aztec Empire and the advancement of the Mexica culture in the 15th century, before the arrival of Spanish conquerors.

During the whole process of making my York thesis film, the Dr. continuously appointed himself as a “Mexica warrior,” exalting the ancestral indigenous cultures of Mexico. But the way he uses the term in the context of the documentary is anachronistic, disregarding time and space. He wants to describe himself as a contemporary fighter with virtues he would describe as

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<sup>3</sup> For an in depth analysis of the distinction between Aztecs and Mexicas please see:

Miguel León-Portilla. “Los Aztecas: Disquisiciones Sobre un Gentilicio.” *Estudios de Cultura Hahuatl*, no. 31 (2000): 307-313. Access date January 19, 2020. <http://www.ejournal.unam.mx/ecn/ecnahuatl31/ECN03113.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> For a comprehensive history of the Mexica people please see:

Jose Luis de Rojas. *Tenochtitlan: Capital of the Aztec Empire*. (University Press of Florida, 2012) 22-40.

“inherent to the Mexica culture,” like equality and mindfulness for others. He also wants to be seen as a protector of knowledge and a fighter for just causes. For the Dr., the term Mexica was always tied with the concept of male warrior; even further, he would tie the concept of Mexica in his discourse with an exacerbated nationalism in which the essence of the “Mexica warrior” served as a symbol of genuine Mexican identity. What became interesting for me was to find out during the filming process that for him, “Mexica” would serve as a wildcard to be used whenever it was convenient for him.

### 1.3 The ‘Real’ in Documentary

In February of 2017 I wrote in my York’s MFA thesis proposal: “*Mexica* will be a documentary film that explores how the ways of life of ancient Mexican warriors help a martial arts master and former American mercenary fight against social injustice in indigenous communities in Mexico since the late 1990s.” I wanted to create a portrait of a conflicted subject whose identity was created in the midst of chaos and violence, and by doing so I expected, paraphrasing American sociologist Herbert Blummer, to understand how Juan Blechen categorizes his own social context, how does he think and what criteria does he use to decide and act a certain way. My process began by aiming at being part of the documentary tradition, a grand phrase that encompasses an eclectic genre of filmmaking in constant evolution that at its core has “the impulse to catch life off-camera, to film what was not planned to happen, or what would have happened whether someone was there to film it or not.”<sup>5</sup> In other words, I was

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<sup>5</sup> Louis Menand. “Nanook and Me ‘Fahrenheit 9/11’ and the documentary tradition.” *New Yorker*. August 2 2004. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2004/08/09/nanook-and-me?verso=true>

expecting to catch the Dr. being what he was claiming to be: a contemporary Mexica warrior posing as physician, martial artist, former guerrilla-fighter and screenwriter.

My approach during the development of *Mexica* was to uphold what I thought was my objective in documentary filmmaking, to record what's real, trying to be a "fly on the wall"<sup>6</sup>, trying not to transform such a reality with my mere presence. But like film scholar Louis Menand has pointed out, the documentary process has rarely been an "unretouched account of reality"<sup>7</sup>, and I would add that flies on walls can still be annoying.

An example of the impossibility of untouched reality in documentary filmmaking can be seen in the story behind the making of the first-ever documentary, *Nanook of the North*, directed by Robert Flaherty. The problems and complications have been there since day one. *Nanook* is an American production released worldwide in 1922 that portrayed the life of Inuit people in northern Canada, and this film has been described by Menand as "largely faked." Flaherty once wrote in an unpublished memoir: "What I want to show is the former majesty and character of these people, while it is still possible—before the white man has destroyed not only their character but the people as well." An ennobling pursuit one may say, but the way Flaherty went about it has been seen as problematic: he would ask the family he cast to "do" things for the film, going against the notion of just capturing what was there, he crossed a line into 'directing' with which documentary has never been comfortable.

As an aspiring documentarian I understood why Flaherty took such an approach while directing his documentary: it is an impulse that comes to filmmakers when they think they are doing the right thing, and it is this same impulse that forces the director to bend reality or to

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<sup>6</sup> "Fly on the wall," in my experience as a professional cinematographer, is commonly used to refer to the filmmaking technique that requires staying in the subject's space until they forget about the presence of the crew.

<sup>7</sup> Louis Menand. "Nanook and Me 'Fahrenheit 9/11' and the documentary tradition." *New Yorker*. August 2 2004. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2004/08/09/nanook-and-me?verso=true>

suspend disbelief in what their subject says or does. I wanted to portray the Dr. as a Mexican warrior because I thought Mexican youth needed to see him as such to improve their own condition and I was willing to believe in him in order to achieve that ennobling goal. There started to emerge a parallel between my complicated persona as the film's director and the Dr.'s persona as my documentary subject: both can be slippery.

## CHAPTER 2: FIRST ROUND OF PRODUCTION

*“Life is not life, life is the retelling of that life.”* - Gabriela Weiner

### 2.1 Flies on Walls

During the first days of production my strategy was observational, I wanted to be a “fly on the wall” in order to get access to the truth about my subject. Once in the door of Evolution Martial Arts Academy, my goal was to remain there until they forgot about me and the presence of my film crew. At that moment I was thinking of Frederick Wiseman’s *Boxing gym*. I was not trying to create a purely observational film, I was looking for observational scenes that would be weaved with interviews later on in the process. At that moment, as I started shooting, I wanted to achieve the level of intimacy that I had seen and appreciated in *Boxing gym*, where the audience can feel people getting tired and frustrated at first, but ultimately I hoped to create an overall sense of achievement thanks, in part, to the length of the shots.

But *Mexica*, my thesis film, was not supposed to be about the school or about Temixco: space had always been secondary in my approach. I was after the Dr. and his interactions with people. I asked sensei Mercado, the director of Evolution Martial Arts Academy, to let us film the Dr. teaching a class because I thought the Dr. was part of the community as an instructor, but I quickly realized he was not seen as an instructor: the students dismissed him as soon as he stood in front of them and he seemed to struggle with basic movements, something that was not obvious for all but that I was able to pick up due to my own experience and training in martial arts. This first main discovery, that the Dr. was not telling me the truth about being a martial artist, made me suspicious of him. This discovery also made the martial arts theme in the film to

become secondary, the backdrop for the Dr. to present himself as something he was not, to mislead me, my crew and my audience.

At this moment I struggled with my impulse to trust my subject because he never stopped presenting himself as part of the martial arts community, but this first interaction between crew and the Evolution Martial Arts Academy created a sense of disrespect from us towards the real sensei, Armando Mercado, making it near impossible for the crew, for me, to be a fly on the wall. I realize now that this impulse of mine (a common impulse in filmmakers: to love your subject) is what created my documentary's tension with reality, modifying how others perceived the Dr. and making the community react a certain way towards the crew. I did not predict what was unfolding in these unexpected behaviours in front of the camera because, as filmmakers, we inevitably had the impact of altering what was there for our lens to capture, by our mere presence. This is what I meant when I wrote that flies can be annoying: even though we, the crew, did not want to be spotted, it is in our nature to be recognizable with our cameras, microphones and general disposition.

It was obvious to me that the observational scenes were not working as an overall approach not only because we were not able to infiltrate the community and were always seen as outsiders, but also because the Dr.'s daily life had very little activities to follow; he would talk about all the things he "was doing" but he would make it impossible for us to schedule a shoot around such activities. It is because of this that I thought I would have to rely heavily on the interview component of the documentary production.

## 2.2 Interviews: A Pugilistic Endeavour

It was also during the summer of 2017 that we had several sit-down interviews with the Dr., during these interviews he would never reply to my questions in a straightforward manner, he would find ways to introduce the same speech I had heard before in stale and formulaic ways, he would lecture me, educating me on ancient Mexican ways. But it started to become clear that he was not an expert in Mexican culture like I once thought, it was starting to become obvious for the crew and myself. The Dr. would mix mythologies and jump, for example, from the Aztecs to Ancient Romans, from Quetzalcoatl to Vishnu in the same sentence; it started to feel like I was interviewing Donald Trump. But did not confront him at this moment, for me the interviews were not about confrontation, they were about elucidation, I wanted to make sense of his life and understand the “Mexica warrior” I thought he was.

The crew was starting to feel bored and ultimately frustrated with him and I started to play the role of intermediary between subject and crew; I would defend his views trying to justify in front of the crew why was the information the Dr. was saying important for the project. But the truth is that the information we were receiving from him was not important and the frustration got to me shortly after. I vividly remember calling my thesis supervisor and telling him almost in tears “my subject is lying to me” and I can still listen to his reply: “who doesn’t (lie)?” This interaction took the documentary on a different path; it was the first change of route in the process of making “*Dr. B.*” I understood my subject was not as clear cut as I wanted him to be and I needed a different strategy to understand who he was. My reference at this moment became Errol Morris’ *Mr. Death: The Rise and fall of Fred A. Leuchter, Jr.*, a film about a character that wants to do the right thing but does not have the knowledge or expertise to be perceived by society as successful in his endeavours.

Errol Morris recently said in an interview for *The New Yorker Magazine*, talking about his latest film *American Dharma*, something I had to learn the hard way in the process of shooting my York thesis film: “No one wants their questions answered. They just want to state their question. And, in answering the question, the person never wants to answer the question. They just want to talk.”<sup>8</sup> Morris was referring to his skepticism about the “question and answer” format in documentary filmmaking. I understand now that my first interviews with the Dr. were almost “pugilistic encounters,” I was keeping score and the Dr. was winning. I was using the interview “as a form of theatrics,” as Morris calls it, without being aware of it.

After watching *Mr. Death* and reflecting with the crew about the next steps to take, I realized that observational scenes and interviews were not going to be enough: I needed a different filmmaking device to make my subject open up to me. I decided then to follow a couple of strategies: first, I would be his confidante, an ear he could pour himself into; I would laugh at his jokes and show zero judgements towards his attitudes and commentaries on anything. And additionally, I would toss out the window my intention to capture reality as it unfolds, I started to shamelessly ask him to do things for the film, and he was delighted to do so, to perform himself in front of the camera.

### **2.3 Performing (a Misogynistic) Identity**

I will use the term “performance” as defined by Ervin Goffman in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* “to refer to all activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has some

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<sup>8</sup>Daniel A. Gross “‘The World Is, of Course, Insane’”: A Conversation with Errol Morris.” *New Yorker*. October 28, 2019. <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/the-new-yorker-interview/the-world-is-of-course-insane-errol-morris-interview/amp>



influence on the observers.”<sup>9</sup> It is important to note that during the summer of 2017, once production had begun, the Dr. would perform for me and the crew the same way I would perform in front of him: without thinking about it. But it started to become clear that a more self-conscious performance would start as soon as our camera was pointed at him. The “observer,” for the Dr., was the potential audience of my York thesis film.

During the documentary process the Dr. would perform in front of our camera, in some instances, I would ask him to do it, in some instances I would not. The distinction is important because it made a tangible difference in each scene, reflecting (unintentionally) an interplay between director and subject. One of the first performances for the camera that the Dr. offered without me requesting it can be seen in the medical consultation scene. The Dr. would wait for me to start the scene and I would play into his request. I gave the “action” signal to him and to the crew to start shooting, and he would direct himself into performing the role of The Physician. The Patient, Patricia, was chosen by the Dr. to be his on-camera partner in this scene, she would talk nicely about her relationship with The Dr. They met when she was young and it was clear that he had influence over her to the point I can say that he moulded her into the perfect patient. After the consultation scene I asked Patricia to be interviewed, she mentioned in the interview an anecdote: when she was 16 years old the Dr. pulled her brassiere from the back and snap it against her skin, he did it as a joke during her first consultation with him. The crew was shocked when hearing the anecdote. I laughed out loud. It was the first time of many during the documentary process that I laughed without being entertained. I did it to ease the Dr. who I thought was listening in the next room. In other words, it was during the shooting of the

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<sup>9</sup> Ervin Goffman. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday anchor books, 1959), Page 8.

consultation scene that I started to “perform” my role as The Director, my “observer” was the Dr., I did it to gain his trust. In Goffman’s terms, we were both “managing our impressions” in front of each other.

After this day I became a receptacle for the Dr.’s stories. I consciously played my role. The problem came when I realized most of his jokes were misogynistic in nature (please see the section: Gender Violence in Mexico). He would repeat the same jokes with diminishing punchlines towards women throughout the day like it was the first time he told them: “I prefer a naked woman in my arms rather than a gun,” “she doesn’t even know how to make tortillas,” “only women are allowed in my room” and several more, some made it into my York thesis film, the grand majority did not.

This attitude towards women and his refusal to give straight answers made the crew feel repelled by him, but as the director of the film, I would continue to laugh at his jokes no matter how many times he repeated them. I needed his collaboration, and wanted to keep his trust during our interactions. My intention was clear to me: I wanted him to remain comfortable and confident in front of the camera so he could speak freely and deliver his comments without staleness. But his intentions for saying so many derogatory comments towards women were not clear to me in those moments. At first, I would attribute it to his age: “he’s just an old man,” I would think. Now, after reviewing all the footage and reflecting on it for a long time, I realize he was after “social status” as described by Goffman: he was positioning himself on top in the setting of the documentary production. The way he went about it was constantly measuring his masculinity against mine. For me, most of my experience directing the production stage of “*Dr. B.*” consisted of being in front of a character that would constantly make me question myself: how similar am I to him? How much do we share that makes us Mexican men?

## CHAPTER 3: REDEFINING THE DR.

*“The (filmmaker’s) gaze should have accountability.” -Iris Ng*

### 3.1 The Title: “*Dr. B.*”

The working title of my thesis film was *Mexica* because I wanted to direct a documentary that explored Mexican ancient culture and martial arts as positive forces of improvement in Mexico’s contemporary society through the portrait of Dr. Juan Blechen. Little did I know, by the time of writing this document, almost three years into the process, and like my mother so eloquently puts it in the film itself: “things changed.” Nearing the completion of the film, those themes were washed out by the Dr.’s deceptions and the strong presence of toxic masculinity I encountered (with my crew) on the journey of directing and editing the film.

The film had to change names to “*Dr. B.*” (with quotation marks included) to caution audiences and cast doubt on the veracity of his appellative: is he really a Dr.? The answer is no, he is a homeopathic practitioner and chiropractor. An example of when this fact became problematic came when I interviewed Bill Weinberg, an American journalist, author of the book *Homage to Chiapas: The New Indigenous Struggles in Mexico* (2000). Weinberg told me in the interview that he knew the Dr. as former American Army soldier and that he saw him practicing allopathic medicine in the mountains of Mexico in the late 1990s during his own research incursions for his book. The problem for me came when I realized that people think of the Dr. as an MD (people around Juan Blechen believe he has a Medical degree) because the Dr. tells them about Bill Weinberg’s book (and other publications that quote him as MD) in order to mislead people to assume he has a medical degree, allowing him to practice conventional medicine informally, without having any certification.

My York thesis film does not try to pull drama out of this fact, what is important to notice is that it is me, the filmmaker, who is cautioning the viewer in a way they may understand by the end of the film. I changed the title because my York thesis project became a reflection on the dynamic between filmmaker and subject and stopped being about national identity politics. The process of directing this film forced me to be self-reflexive and the Dr. changed me as a director and the way I see the filmmaking process itself, forcing the film to morph into something I am hesitant to call a documentary film. “*Dr. B.*” is still a portrait, but in the words of writer/curator Alexander Scrimgeour when referring to the portraiture work of video artist Omer Fast: “The question of what it is a portrait of is itself complicated, but it becomes secondary to how the work functions like a relationship: through intimacy, desire, and projection.”<sup>10</sup> And in the words of Fast himself as quoted by Scrimgeour: “it (portraiture) is always driven by conventions of representation and the dynamic between artist and sitter.”

### **3.2 The Mountains: Chronicle of my not so Sudden Disenchantment**

It was when I started to consciously question my interactions with the Dr., that my York thesis project took yet another turn. With the use of voice over, I chose to point out in the film when the project “stopped being a biography to become an investigation,” an investigation on how far was I willing to follow the Dr. A biography would have had fewer layers, and been more straight ahead.

It had been planned from the beginning of production to go with the Dr. to La Sierra de Guerrero (Mountains), an eight hour drive from Temixco. It was my understanding that he would

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<sup>10</sup>Alexander Scrimgeour. “In the light of Doubt.” *Spike Art Magazine*. No. 46. Winter 2015/2016. <https://www.spikeartmagazine.com/en/articles/portrait-omer-fast>

go to several locations there, a few times a year, to provide free medical consultations to people living in poverty and surrounded by violence due to drug cartels and harassment from Mexican military personnel and paramilitary forces in the region. I was expecting to follow him as he recounted his time there, my idea was to get on-camera the stories he had told (off-camera) of him being a guerrilla fighter during the late 1990s in that specific area of Mexico. The trip took place during three days at the tail end of the first production round, in the late summer of 2017.

Day one consisted mostly of long driving hours listening to the Dr. speak non-stop, and by this point the crew and myself were frustrated with him, as our character, but also off-camera. It was during these shooting days when the idea of turning the camera around, towards the filmmakers, started to be appealing. Our conversations about the Dr. after the shooting day ended began to shine new light on him, and we found ourselves saying the things we were wishing other characters to say. At this moment I was resisting taking this more “meta” approach, and I struggled to maintain the focus of the documentary solely on him, trying to keep a biographical approach.

The small towns we visited are beautiful, being there made me understand why the Dr. talked about the place with an air of mystification, idealizing the region due to its beauty, but things are changing quickly there and it was obvious for the crew that the Dr. was not willing to see it. He repeated constantly to us and for the camera what “had been” in anecdotes about people’s clothing, food, customs and general social behaviour. People know him in the Mountains as “the Dr.” and the general consensus is that he comes there to help. We learned that he first arrived in this region in the mid-1990s and positioned himself as an asset for the community the same way he did in Temixco, by telling people he was a physician and former U.S. Marine, deceitfully, to acquire social status. Also, he would stand out as the only white-

looking person around and he would use paternalistic language, over-explaining to the people he encountered in the region (off camera) the necessity to rise up and revolt against what he called “the bad guys.” The way he talked to the indigenous people while being in their presence made me and my crew question why he would go there in the first place. I accepted this behaviour the same way I should not have allowed his misogynistic attitudes to play out innocently on camera and all of this made me feel increasingly uncomfortable, but it did not deter me from keeping the documentary going. By this moment, the Dr. seemed to me more like a Spanish conqueror (or a white settler) scouting the terrain, rather than a Mexica warrior defending ancestral values.

The first really significant incident of day two in the Mountains happened during the interview with El Profe (the professor). During this interview El Profe jokingly mentioned the fact that people were selling young women in a town nearby. The crew was shocked and I did not know how to respond; I did not call “cut,” I needed him to justify the crew's presence in front of the community we were visiting. After this incident and throughout the day, it started to look to me like the Dr. had a specific agenda for his visit to that particular town in the Mountains, and we were perhaps complicit in bringing him to that region, at this specific moment. He would ask repeatedly about the possibility of buying a “terrenito” (little piece of land) from the people in the town and he would also ask about what happened to “la muchacha” (young girl). The Dr.’s questions became repetitive to the point where the crew thought he was speaking in code: “la muchacha” could be a specific group of people and “el terrenito” could refer to firearms. But this was not the case and it became painfully clear to me back in the town’s hotel that night that we were complicit in acts with which we could not comfortably reconcile. My sound recordist made me listen to a clip he recorded near the end of the day when he was recording ambient sound and kept the Dr.’s microphone open. In the audio recording the Dr. asks his friend about buying a

“terrenito” from him so he could move to the region to live with his 14-year-old girlfriend.

Listening to this made my world crumble; there was no way to escape this information about my main character, the man I was supposed to love. The next day, unsure how to proceed, I acted as if nothing had happened in front of the Dr. - I did not know what else to do, we had one more interview with him that felt pointless, and then I asked the crew to pack the gear and we drove back to Temixco, in silence.

In retrospect, it is easy to understand why the Dr. saw that area in the Mountains as “the perfect place to live,” as he would call it in front of the crew. There, he had the social status that would allow him to live without complications in a society that was permissive with his questionable behaviour and attitudes towards women; there, his *machismo* was inscribed in ancestral ways. It is true that some indigenous communities in Mexico allow marriage with underage girls (as young as 12-years-old) because they have been doing it for centuries, but the fact that local communities allow this behaviour does not mean it is right or legal; it is neither. It is a symptom of a patriarchal society that sees women as utilitarian objects.

I never expected that I would be tackling gender issues in my York thesis project, but the overwhelming misogynistic remarks coming from the Dr. were permeating our daily coexistence to a point they became impossible to ignore. The Dr. wants to live freely with a young woman taking care of him because it would make him feel more like a man – this was Dr. B.’s “dark spot,” but unlike Evaristo (my prior subject), he had no family advocating on his behalf, protecting him. His jokes, his conceptions of gender roles and his remarks about and towards women made me and my crew reflect on two important subjects in reference to Mexican culture that would help me understand the Dr.’s attitudes and behaviour: the construction of toxic masculinities and gender violence in Mexico.

### 3.3 Toxic Masculinities

When talking about the construction of gender roles in a specific culture, such as Mexican culture, it is important to notice the social context such creation takes place. There is not a single universal parameter to define Masculinity. Therefore, it is also important to notice that there is not a single masculinity, this is why I use the term in the plural. American sociologist Michael Kimmel wrote: “Virility (understood here as manliness, what makes a person a man) is not aesthetic nor constant, it is historic; it is not a manifestation of an inner essence, it is constructed in society; it is not an outcome of biology, it is created by culture. Virility means different things in different eras and for different people.”<sup>11</sup>

The Dr. echoes a cultural model of what it means in Mexico to “be a man,” he displays a series of practices and conventions rooted in Mexican culture. I decided to use the term toxic masculinities because of its current popularity in mass media, social media, advertisements, blogs and casual conversations. “Toxic masculinity” is defined by David Brockway, spokesperson for The Good Men Project<sup>12</sup> as the “set of negative behaviours that men think they have to follow in order to be proper men.” This is exactly what I found in the Dr. during our conversations, in the interviews, in his jokes and in his behaviour towards women during the production of my York thesis film. He would associate virility with physical strength, roughness and the capacity to have many children with different partners while associating femininity with

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<sup>11</sup> Quoted in: María Isabel Jociles Rubio. “El estudio sobre las masculinidades. Panorámica general / The study of masculinity: a general overview.” *Gazeta de Antropología Universidad Complutense de Madrid*. No. 17 (2001) Accessed December 20, 2019. <http://www.gazeta-antropologia.es/?p=3316>

<sup>12</sup> The Good Man Project defines itself as “a diverse, multi-faceted media company and an idea-based social platform. The Good Men Project is a diverse community of 21st century thought leaders who are actively participating in a conversation about the way men’s roles are changing in modern life—and the way those changes affect everyone.” <https://goodmenproject.com/about/>



fragility, purity and fidelity; he is homophobic and openly denigrates what he calls “delicate men”, while also being misogynistic and openly denigrating women. But what impressed me the most was his necessity to place himself on top as an alpha male in all social situations. He was constantly measuring his manliness against mine, employing a strategy of “shock and awe” in order to gain status. Most of these attitudes and behaviours happened in front of me but outside of frame, not when the camera was rolling. Instead of thinking “he’s just an old man,” I now had to struggle with whether I had an obligation to protect him, as the director, to elide these moments and leave them out of the film, or whether my larger obligations and responsibilities lay elsewhere.

One instance of ‘toxicity’ that made it into the film was his interaction with self-defence instructor Ricardo Almazan in what I call the Rolex scene. The Dr. tells a joke about a time he was stopped at a military roadblock, the punchline of his story is that he got away telling the soldier he would “fuck him in front of everyone” if he was to win in a physical context. I didn’t hear the story as it was happening (I must have been distracted during the shoot), I found it in the edit and decided to leave it in the film as an example of what I got to know as normal, *macho*, behaviour from the Dr.

### **3.4 Gender Violence in Mexico**

*Machismo* is a word derived from the Spanish word *Macho*, which is defined by the Real Academia de la Lengua Espanola (Spanish Royal Academy of Language) as an “animal with male genitalia.” But the “-ismo” in the word refers to “doctrine” or “school of thought.” *Machismo* is then, under popular standards, a way of thinking from the male perspective. But contemporary *Machismo* is more than a way of thinking, it translates into attitudes and

behaviour. A Colombian writer, Penélope Rodríguez, wrote a definition of *machismo* in 1987 that seems accurate to this day: for the author, *machismo* is “the stereotype of male superiority *per-sé*, is the manifestation of an almightiness that will not spare obsessive efforts to grant itself exaggerated importance.”<sup>13</sup> And it is under this umbrella of superiority, paraphrasing the author, that male violent attitude and behaviour against women becomes normalized.

Gender violence varies in intensity and social acceptance all over the world, but it generally starts with subtle behaviour: jokes, infantilization, paternalism, contempt and the use of language to exalt violence. Graciela Atencio, director of *femicidio.net* explains: “femicides are the last link in a long chain of discrimination towards women, they are not isolated incidents, they are part of a systemic structure that places women in vulnerable situations. (...) (misogynistic) jokes degrade with attitudes towards life that portrait normalized gender violence, creating great harm to society.”<sup>14</sup>

In Mexico, gender violence is not a private matter, it is a social problem that manifests the historic inequality between men and women with extreme acts of violence. Publicist Esther Antón expressed in an interview: “We are all repelled by the killing of women, but we also laugh at *machista* jokes. Humour normalizes *machismo* and this is the root of violence.”<sup>15</sup> The numbers are alarming: in Mexico there are on average six murdered women per day. In 2012 and 2013 alone, 3,892 women were murdered in Mexico (without counting Mexico City), out of which

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<sup>13</sup> Quoted in: Grupo Mujer y Sociedad, eds. *Mujer, Amor y Violencia: Nuevas Interpretaciones de Antiguas Realidades*. Bogota: Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 1991. Accessed January 19, 2020. Page 198. <http://bdigital.unal.edu.co/45756/1/9586012875.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> Graciela Atencio. Ed. *Femicidio: El Asesinato de Mujeres por ser Mujeres*. (Madrid: Catarata, 2015) 256.

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in: Isabel Valdés. “Chistes machistas contra la violencia de género.” *El país*, December 27, 2019. [https://elpais.com/elpais/2017/11/22/mujeres/1511344526\\_738280.html](https://elpais.com/elpais/2017/11/22/mujeres/1511344526_738280.html)

only 613 cases were investigated as femicides<sup>16</sup>, putting on display the systemic, misogynistic mentality of the Mexican authorities, a mentality that permeates all Mexican culture.

From 2012 to 2013 the number of forced disappearances of women under 17-years-old increased from 404 to 1,179 (a 191.8% increase), compared to forced disappearances of men in the same age group which only records a 14.7% increase<sup>17</sup>. This is a symptom of a disease that has been allowed to grow by a State that condones *machista* attitudes in a society that is used to impunity. My concept of *Mexica* did not include this; Dr. B.'s "Mexica" does, unfortunately.

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<sup>16</sup> Teresa Margolles; Elina Chauvet; Mayra Martell; Iván Castaneire; Cintia Bolio and Teresa Serrano. "Feminicidio en México. ¡Ya basta!" Exposition. Museo Memoria y Tolerancia. June, 2017.

<sup>17</sup> Teresa Margolles; Elina Chauvet; Mayra Martell; Iván Castaneire; Cintia Bolio and Teresa Serrano. "Feminicidio en México. ¡Ya basta!" Exposition. Museo Memoria y Tolerancia. June, 2017.

## CHAPTER 4: HARD CHOICES

*“Everything you see in the film is a reflection of a choice.” - Frederick Wiseman*

### 4.1 The Importance of the Crew

The production model for my York thesis film required not only minimal crew but also high levels of trust amongst all of us. The first round of production forced us to live in close quarters for a long period of time (six weeks) and although I could not have anticipated that the content would prove difficult to handle, I wanted to be surrounded by trustworthy people without compromising their technical capabilities. I once heard Canadian filmmaker Allan King say: “Put the crew in the right place, at the right time and get the hell out of the way.” This is easier said than done: aspiring to follow exactly as Allan King recommended proved to be paramount for the successful completion of the film - it gave me a criteria to hand pick the people that would join me in the production stage of my York thesis film.

First, I chose J. Alejandro Trejo (Trejo) as my cinematographer because he had been my camera assistant, second camera operator and friend for over ten years. I consider him a student of mine, and I knew Trejo was a martial artist (something that was important at the beginning of the process), and he was the person that introduced me to Evolution Martial Arts through his own sensei: Ángel Postigo, director of Artes Marciales Unidas A.C., a well-established and recognized institution in Mexico City.

My sound person, Alfredo Gonzalez (Alf) also proved to be an invaluable asset for the production of my York thesis project. Alf had been my Introduction to Filmmaking student back in 2013 in Puebla, Mexico and at 23-years-old stood out to me as a highly intelligent person, and he also has a background in linguistics, which proved to be useful for the film. Alf would analyse

the Dr.'s comments beyond their content, including notes on his sound reports that commented on the Dr.'s use of language to express class and gender differences. Finally, the crew was completed with the inclusion of Natalia Bernal (Natalia). She and I had successfully collaborated on documentary projects before shooting "*Dr. B.*" and I had no doubts about her capacity to handle my York thesis film as the producer. Natalia is also an accomplished documentary researcher and her background as an anthropologist proved to be invaluable for the production of "*Dr. B.*" She would put situations into context for me so I could make informed decisions.

## **4.2 In Standby**

After returning to Temixco from the trip to the Mountains, the crew was in a state of shock from what we unintentionally heard in the sound recordings on that second day in the Mountains. We had to stop production altogether even though we had activities planned back in Temixco. During this standby period, the crew engaged in countless group talks about the Dr.'s behaviour and attitudes towards us, women and the world in general. This dynamic allowed the crew not only to reflect on the (im)possibility of really getting to know or love or redeem the subject with whom we had been spending the past five weeks, but also created consensus in the crew about the Dr.'s past and particularly about what I now call his "dark spot:" his 14-year-old girlfriend and his intention to buy a piece of land for the purposes of taking her to live with him in the Mountains.

I cannot deny there were tense moments in our group talks. We did not always see eye to eye when talking about homophobia or gender issues, but we all agreed that the Dr. used us to make the trip to the Mountains happen for his own gain, to scout a piece of land and to reconnect with that specific community. In the same way, talking about peculiar attitudes and behaviours

we had witnessed from the Dr., we came to the conclusion that we knew who his “girlfriend” was, we had seen them together, she was one of many underage students at Evolution Martial Arts Academy. We remained in standby, without recording anything, for a week while wrestling with our ethical stand in the face of this new information. Should we ignore what was happening? Or should we do something about it?

What could I do? I was afraid to lose my subject’s trust, which meant jeopardizing the film and everything we had worked as a crew to achieve by that point in the production. As a director I was working hard to maintain the possibility of continuing the project, and also complete my York MFA. Also, I felt I could not go to the authorities with only the sound recording, there was not sufficient evidence to start a legal process in a *machista* society like Temixco. So I decided to talk with sensei Mercado, a person who is really involved with the community and had a long-standing relationship with the family of the underage girl we thought was the Dr.’s girlfriend. We expressed our concerns and offered our findings to him and the mother of the girl, leaving it to them to create a plan of action to protect the well-being of the minor. On my part, I decided not to include the image nor the name of the underage girl in the film, it was the only thing I could control to protect her integrity. After the meeting with sensei Mercado and the mother of the girl, round one of production was over.

### **4.3 Second Round of Production**

While reviewing the footage of the first round of production (during July-December 2017) I encountered a plethora of jokes and comments from the Dr. that reflected his toxic masculinity and I was surprised by my silence and permissive attitude towards it. It was clear that the way such content needed to be put together in my York thesis film would also be a

reflection of me, as the filmmaker/director, as much as it would be a comment on him, the subject of the portrait I was making. I also realized I ran the risk of legitimizing him and his misogynistic attitudes and I did not want to do this. During the preparation for the second round I revisited several times the possibility of stopping the project altogether, but I realized that I was determined to finish the project driven by the necessity to comment directly on the Dr. and complete my York MFA, but to do so I had to switch strategies, I had to find a way to include my commentary in a way that relieved this discomfort.

My reference at the time was *Peter and the Farm*, a character study film directed by Tony Stone and released in 2016, that follows alcoholic farmer Peter Dunning in his daily routine over an implied span of a year. Stone has commented in interviews that one of his approaches was “not interrupting what he (Peter) was doing,” aiming at being truthful to what was happening in front of his camera. But *Peter and the Farm* is a self-reflexive film to an extent, the crew appears repeatedly in subtle ways throughout the story and their appearance functions as commentary to what is happening with the subject. They make clear the filmmaker’s opinion of his main character. The main difference I see between Peter and the Dr. is that the former is engaged mostly in self-harm, while the Dr. is harmful to others. So, if I was to use a self-reflexive approach I had to actively look to capture the comments and reactions of my crew. I had to show my crew as an active character throughout the production process so I turned the camera towards the filmmakers and recorded our conversations during the second round of the film's production. Including the crew as characters in this stage of the process implied changes in the overall aesthetic approach.

The first scene recorded under this premise was the dinner table scene at my mother’s place in Mexico City. This scene was the reunion of the crew, five months after our trip to the

Mountains. In the scene we can see Natalia, Trejo, Alf, my mother, and myself, the director. To my surprise, the character who took importance during the scene was my mother. She had been listening to the crew through dinner complaining about the Dr. and she took it in her hands to advise us on what to do next. I listened to my mother's advice and stopped seeing the film as a biographical approach to the Dr. altogether. For me, the information I received from my character about himself during the first round of production became secondary to how it made me feel about him and also about myself. As a result, the second round of production focused on exploring these feelings and impressions the Dr. had left with me and the crew. By doing so I was expecting to remove myself from factual filmmaking and imprint qualities in the film Paul Arthur describes as commonly seen in "first-person" documentaries. I wanted to achieve a "sensibility that privileges gestures of intimacy and confession; construing personal identity as an effect of self-conscious, albeit quotidian or casual, performance."<sup>18</sup>

In order to capture and communicate these impressions the strategy became formal in its approach. To achieve a "gritty DIY" feel, as Paul Arthur refers to it, I recorded the crew's conversations in the car on our way back from shooting with the Dr. and, later in the process, included making-of moments from both rounds of production. The car imagery feels intimate in part due to the proximity of the camera to the subject (in this case the crew) and because of the hand-held movement and reactions that came naturally to Trejo, the cinematographer. To contrast the grittiness seen with the car scenes and making-of moments which call attention to the crew I also planned for the Dr. to perform specific scenes for the camera, aiming to capture carefully composed imagery. This footage became the first two scenes of the film: the bridge and the window scenes. My intention was to make clear to the viewer my own "acceptance of

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<sup>18</sup>Paul Arthur. "Extreme Makeover: the changing face of documentary," *Cineaste*, issue 3, volume 30 (2005): page 19.



'simulation' as unproblematic bearer of reality.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>Paul Arthur. “Extreme Makeover: the changing face of documentary,” *Cineaste*, issue 3, volume 30 (2005): page 19.

## CHAPTER 5: THE IMPRESSIONISTIC FILMMAKER IN ME

*“I’m not a journalist. My work does not exist in a court of law. It exists in a space of art which allows for contradictions.” - Omer Fast*

### 5.1 Alejandro Coronado: My Background and Its Impact on “Dr. B.”

I am a cinematographer with thirteen years of experience in film productions, I have been involved in a wide variety of projects, including feature-length fiction, documentary and hybrid films produced in Mexico, Canada and Colombia. “Dr. B.” is my first film as a director, and it was important for me that my first film was about Mexican culture because I consider myself a Mexican filmmaker educated in Canada. In this sense, I must acknowledge in particular the influence that two long-standing collaborators have had on me as a cinematographer and filmmaker, but most directly in my formation as a director: Mexican filmmaker Nicolás Pereda and Canadian filmmaker Chelsea McMullan.

First, I have to mention my work with Nicolás Pereda,<sup>20</sup> I have done the cinematography for six of his nine feature films. Nicolás refuses in his work to adhere to a single genre, he is constantly playing in the in-between space of fiction and documentary. The best example of this is his feature-length film *Summer of Goliath* (2010), where I am credited as the cinematographer. The film is a hybrid between fiction and documentary that narrates various stories of people in a rural town in Mexico. Amalio, Nico and Oscar are three brothers whose stories we learn through a series of interviews and re-enactments. Their father left them many years ago and their mother can barely support them (a common *machista* behaviour in Mexico). The way the interviews are

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<sup>20</sup>Nicolás Pereda is a York MFA alumnus with an extensive body of work showcased in the most prestigious film festivals in the world (like Cannes, Toronto and Venice, to name a few). I met Nicolás during my BFA in film at York University in 2002.

conducted is important: we sense their isolation by the way they are framed and the way the camera moves. To achieve this required long previous conversations between Nicolás and myself, and it is worth noting that the “stories” the kids share on the interviews are fictional; Nicolás would give them a basic outline of the scene he invented and the kids would fill in the gaps. Hybridizing film language is something I try to include in my own work, although my approach to “*Dr. B.*” started as a documentary I had to modify my approach to include more performative scenes, like the two opening scenes of my film; I was not looking for the “in-between” space (fiction/documentary) where Nicolás works, rather, I was looking to use the cinematic language I put into practice on his films, with my thesis film.

A perfect example of how I tried to hybridize genres in “*Dr. B.*” is the scene on the bridge at the beginning of the film. I asked the Dr. to perform for me the story of him saving his mother at the age of eight, I told him where to stand, when to walk and I carefully composed the frame aiming to create a sense of his connection to the world: all the lines in the composition direct the viewer’s eye towards him because he is the center of the story, I use a wide-angle lens to let the space feel big, which is a nice contrast considering that in most of the scenes the Dr. speaks, the camera was either closer or using a telephoto lens, creating a more claustrophobic feel. In the bridge scene, I also placed the camera not at eye level<sup>21</sup> but rather at body level, so his body would not be seen from above or underneath, trying to avoid judgement by the use of framing alone, a nice contrast considering the following image: the window scene, which is an image designed to judge the character.

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<sup>21</sup> Which in my professional experience as a cinematographer, is common practice in documentary filmmaking.

The second director that has highly influenced my approach to filmmaking is Chelsea McMullan,<sup>22</sup> I have collaborated with Chelsea in my capacity as a cinematographer starting in the year 2002 and since then I have never stopped learning from her and her approach to filmmaking. I am currently the cinematographer of two feature-length documentaries in production she is directing: *Miraculous Breast* and *Throat*. I will talk about *Throat* because it is a project I have been working on in parallel to “*Dr. B.*” (production of *Throat* started in the late summer of 2017, right after the first round of production of my York thesis film). *Throat* will be a highly visual portrait of Inuit Canadian singer Tanya Tagaq, the film will be centered on a concert performed in Toronto on November 1st 2017 and will interweave, in an impressionistic way, archival footage, stylized interviews and imagery captured in the Canadian Arctic while travelling alongside Tanya on three different occasions: late summer of 2017 and the summers of 2018 and 2019. It is important to notice the amount of time it has taken to produce the film, the space between shoots is by design and is something I tried to copy in the production of my own film and is also something I aspire to do in my future work: Doug Nayler,<sup>23</sup> filmmaker and long-standing collaborator, refers to this approach as “slow cooking.” This approach allows for things to happen in the life of the subject, ultimately enriching the project. It also allows the filmmaker to review what has been captured and restructure the approach for the next round(s) of production. Of course, each production is different and every filmmaker has different resources and deadlines to adhere to, but as a general approach, I did and will try to go back to the subject in different time periods. In the case of “*Dr. B.*” I did two rounds of production (the first in June

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<sup>22</sup> A York MFA alumnus in film with extensive work in documentary filmmaking and whom I met during my York BFA in film.

<sup>23</sup> A York BFA alumnus in film with extensive work in documentary filmmaking and whom I met during my York BFA in film.

2017 and the second in January 2018), this allowed me to plan what I called “performances” from the Dr., more notably: the window scene.

The keyword for me when talking about *Throat* is impressionistic. Chelsea is a master in allowing emotions to slowly seep into her films, and she uses filmmaking language to create reactions rather than mere rationalizations. During the time in-between rounds of production for “*Dr. B.*” (fall of 2017) I realized, while screening *Throat* footage and reviewing “*Dr. B.*” footage, that I did not have any impressionistic images of the Dr. that could be used to create an emotion by itself, without the need of explanation or subject-matter. This was my goal when proposing to the Dr. to perform the beginning of his novel *Viento en el Cielo* in front of a window, to create an emotional reaction in the audience (I was not sure at that moment if such a reaction had to be positive or negative, this is something I would resolve later, in the editing of the project). *Viento en el Cielo* was self-published in Morelos, Mexico in 1993. The novel narrates the story of a young medical student that is kidnapped by guerrilla fighters while travelling through the mountains from one major city to another in Mexico. Throughout the story, the main character suffers a transformation out of the horrors he witnessed during combat battles and the love he encountered in a “beautiful and caring indigenous woman” with “shiny dark skin.”<sup>24</sup> Clearly the novel drew on autobiography. My directions to the Dr. in the window scene were simple: to act as if he was the main character from *Viento en el Cielo* arriving blindfolded to a scene of misery and despair, as described at the beginning of his book. The Dr. was happy to oblige, for me the difficulty resided in how to capture the scene. I was planning on using the image to comment on him but I did not know where the image would be located in the final edit or how it would function in relation to the images and content around it. So, once I

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<sup>24</sup>Juan Blechen. *Viento en el cielo*. (Morelos: Self Published). Page 4.

chose not to overtly refer to the Dr.'s novel in my thesis film, I decided to use the image to comment on the process itself of shooting this portrait, trying to be impressionistic about it. This is why the Dr. is framed by the window, to hopefully invite the viewer to reflect on the person who has decided to frame the film's protagonist like this, to let the audience feel that there is more about him than what the camera can capture, than what the filmmaker is letting you see. In the end, the image functions in a more complicated way than a frame within a frame, but that is due to decisions that came with editing and sound design. I wanted a means of expressing my complex love-hate relationship with the subject of my thesis documentary, and so I turned to Elvis. I used the song "I Can't Help Falling In Love With You"<sup>25</sup> to elicit two distinct reactions from the viewer: at the beginning of the film in drawing curiosity and empathy towards the character, and at the end of the film in confronting the audience to judge the characters (including the filmmaker) themselves, using the song not only as an emotional signifier but also as a reminder of the beginning of the journey.

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<sup>25</sup> American song originally recorded by Elvis Presley in 1961.

## CONCLUSION

During the entire process of “*Dr. B.*” from development to post-production I have aimed for a portrait of a complex character, but that journey of discovery forced me to turn the camera towards the filmmakers, complicating further the dynamic between creator and subject and making it difficult to define who the film is truly trying to portray. Answering this simple question consumed an editing process that centered on the pursuit of a solution to how I could truly communicate who the Dr. is to a viewer. My York thesis film was conceived to depict the life of Juan Blechen, but during the editing process I discovered it was also fundamentally about the crew’s (and my own) feelings and reactions to the revelation of who the Dr. truly was.

During the process of directing “*Dr. B.*” I had to switch directions constantly in order to keep the project going, to find its final form. I began trying to love my subject because I understood this to be helpful in documentary filmmaking. It was conceived as an ennobling goal: to portrait a Mexica warrior as a positive image for Mexican youth. But I encountered a character that was impossible to legitimize in a portrait, due to the ethical challenges I found myself confronted with. I started to fall out of love as soon as I started to see more fully the person behind the character I had in front of me. So, what did I do? I kept going with the project, by inertia, driven by the necessity to finish my MFA thesis and by a sense of doing the right thing. Although I had moments of reflection and doubt as to the correct path forward, I never stopped the project altogether because I felt the necessity to comment on what I had experienced and what had been discovered about my subject.

The film is still a portrait, but it morphed from a biographical approach to a “meta” approach. This happened in order to prevent the legitimization of a problematic subject that operates by presenting himself as something he is not. I understand now that the Dr. did it to

position himself in control of the documentary production in terms of “social status.” I understand this behavior is compulsive for the Dr. I saw him employing the same strategies in different social contexts: in front of a self-defense instructor in the Rolex scene, asking the interviewees in the mountains to cover their faces, lying about having a medical degree to a community that thought of him as a friend and lying to me about being a martial artist. But the most problematic behavior I encountered in my subject was his toxic masculinity, starting with misogynistic jokes played as innocuous fun and climaxing with having a girlfriend sixty four years younger than him. He puts into practice a perspective valuing women solely as utilitarian objects, views which further entrench gender violence in Mexico. Finding this much darker reality forced me to change directions and go “meta.” The process of finding out created a ripple effect within the crew that made me confront hard choices: the disclosure of my findings to sensei Mercado and changing the film's aesthetic and editorial approach, connecting the findings I encountered during the two production rounds with my own impressionistic creative approach as director.

In “*Dr. B.*” I experiment with ways of communicating the interplay between subject and filmmaker with techniques that hybridize film language. I realized, after directing my York thesis project that the emotional impression on the viewer is more important to me than keeping the film as close to factual reality as possible. In the words of Errol Morris: “Movies are movies (they are neither true nor false).”



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