

Robert Gomez | A New Visual Regime:
Narco Warfare through Social Media

The interrogation and execution of an alleged female extortionist in Ciudad Juárez, 2010.
Video clip from TV Azteca, Mexico City, posted on YouTube on October 20, 2010



THE INTERROGATION AND EXECUTION OF AN ALLEGED FEMALE extortionist in Ciudad Juárez, 2010. Video clip from TV Azteca, Mexico City, posted on YouTube on October 20, 2010:

Are you a widow, or are you single?

A widow.

How many kids do you have?

Two.

The camera pans out from her face. San Juana Gabriela Enriquez Galván stands in a room with white walls. Her hands are tied and her eyes are closed. She stands between three assault rifles held by men in black ski masks. If we look closely, we can see her thumbs fidgeting. Her interrogator stands behind a video camera and yells at her in Spanish:

How long have you worked extorting the people of Ciudad Juarez?

Two months.

Who are you working for?

For La Linea.

How much do they pay you a week?

2000 pesos (166 dollars).

On October 19, 2010, Juana was interrogated and executed. She

was an alleged extortionist in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico. The interrogation and execution were recorded with a digital camera and posted on the Internet. The execution took place in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, which in 2009 and 2010 was the most violent city in the world.¹ The four characters in the video represent the larger conflict between cartels, the federal police, the Mexican army, and local law enforcement to control the American entry point into El Paso, Texas. This video was created by the interrogators and posted on YouTube as a type of representational and psychological warfare. Since its posting, the video been released on the Internet in several iterations. The most viewed version is one that TV Azteca, a local television channel, edited into a news broadcast and reposted on the Internet. As of the writing of this essay, the video of Juana's execution has a total of 5,180,609 hits. That means that Juana has been posthumously interrogated and executed 5,180,609 times.

The video of Juana exemplifies the development of cartel violence in digital space, wherein digital videos have become instruments of war. Narcos, or Mexican drug cartels,² appropriate social media and wield digital cameras as instruments of power, creating spectacles of violence to create a new dimension of warfare. How can a camera be used as a weapon? Different frames of visualization actively participate in the production of reality. They do this by soliciting the viewer to participate in the power struggles within the image. In images visualizing perpetrators and victims of violence, we are solicited to choose between the dominance of the aggressor and the precarious life of the victim. As viewers, we too are framed within the power relationships enacted within the visual frame. Juana's execution video points to a larger social system based upon the spectacle of violence as a means of social control in Mexico. There are dozens of these videos available on the Internet.

Six Narco execution videos, all demonstrating the use of a similar "script," staging, and visual tropes of violent power, 2010–11



Narco interrogation execution videos are staged and performed for the camera.³ Disseminated through social media, they are directed toward both rival cartels and a general audience. The name their opponents directly, and their opponents respond with even more explicit videos of violent acts. They most often contain a set cast of participants: executioner, victim, and executioner's comrades.

A new digital media regime is emerging in Mexico. Narco execution videos have become ideological battlegrounds that are atemporal, and decontextualized, infinitely reproducible and accessible. Here, cartels create their own power structures through the reality-framing device of the digital video camera. They produce and proliferate images of events in which they dominate and their enemies are literally disarmed on the floor. These spectacles of violence function as a visual language that influences real world contests. This incorporation of social media into the terrain of violent conflict redefines the power relationships between violence, culture, and digital space.

Narco videos function as extensions of power when viewers are called to dis-identify with dismembered bodies, when the perceived force of the visual spectacle stands in place for legitimate authority, and when the acceleration of violence in digital space leads to the acceleration of dehumanization in physical space. Dehumanization goes a step further, as the victim's right to life is taken in favor of making an object upon which to display power. In other words, Narco execution videos recontextualize their victims so that they are de-individualized, becoming the medium through which violent power is expressed.

From 2006 to 2011, 40,000 violent deaths were attributed to the cartels' rush for power. The specter of violence is everywhere. There are no clear battle lines, no safe zones. Allegiances are quickly bought and sold. Coping with this reality has facilitated the creation of sev-

eral economies and Narco subcultures. This is not a traditional war, and is not conducted through traditional means. Narco power effectively challenges both existing state power and cultural norms. International drug trafficking has permeated Mexican society. It earns the cartels an estimated thirty billion dollars a year.⁴ As an example of the cartels' power, in 2011, the Sinaloa Cartel's leader el Chapo Guzmán made *Forbes* magazine's list of "The World's Most Powerful People," while the Mexican president Felipe Calderón did not.⁵ Although one rich drug lord cannot dominate an entire social system, this recognition of Guzmán's power does denote the incredible success that cartels have had in competing with established, democratically sanctioned systems of government, media, and culture.

Social media provides democratic means of self-representation. Cartels capitalize both on advancements in technology and on the experiential impact of live performance to create an influential, visceral experience. They perform the power roles they seek to claim through the reality-creating device of the digital frame. Enacting violence and speaking their messages creates a close connection between their violent acts and the word they speak. Victims become more victimized, and dominant powers become more powerful, when they are performed as opposed to simply being represented through a still image. Social media allows the singular performance in physical space to manifest itself millions of times in digital space. This proliferation enables Narco videos, the performance of violence upon digital platforms, to become a lever in real-world struggles for power.

Take, for example, this video produced several months after the murder of San Juana Gabriela Enriquez Galván. Created by Cartel del Golfo and disseminated via Blog del Narco, it was specifically created as a response to the discovery of a mass grave containing the bodies of 187 people. Among them were dozens of women and children. A

Members of Cartel del Golfo butcher a member of los Zetas and claim justice for the massacre in San Fernando, Tamaulipas, 2011. Video posted on Blog del Narco, April 14, 2011



week after responsibility for the massacre that led to this burial was attributed to los Zetas, their rivals, Cartel del Golfo staged a video in which they dismembered a supposed member of los Zetas. Over the span of eight minutes and thirty-four seconds, eight cartel members lop off his limbs with a dull, yellow ax. “This is for all of the damn Zetas, from the 40th and 42nd group, for Lazcana, and for all of the damn people helping the Zetas Cartel. This is what is going to happen to all of you assholes: watch, so you remember.” The ax moves from the victim’s right shoulder to his left shoulder. “This is for those that work as lookouts, working like pussies, financing them with money and jerking them off . . .” The speaker picks up his victim’s decapitated head by its hair and holds it in front of his crotch. “You all are good at killing children, assholes, to kill children in San Fernando, Tamaulipas, you killed a shit load of kids. You take advantage of the innocent.” The ax continues snapping through flesh, and the head is tossed to the ground. By performing an excessive amount of violence on a single body, Cartel del Golfo was attempting to create an equivalency for the 187 massacred bodies. The dissemination of their spectacular act of violence via social media was a bid for their legitimacy as a just power in Mexico. The struggle for power here clearly crossed from violent acts in physical space to the visual spectacle of violence in physical space.

The cartels’ use of social media is broad and sophisticated, incorporating platforms such as Google Blogger, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. A key example of an online Narco entity, Blog del Narco publishes some of the most gruesome, commented upon, and cited examples of Narco violence. It is claimed to be the primary site for news on drug trafficking in Mexico, and it is the primary forum for the competition of video violence between cartels. Other social media sites are just one click away.

On Facebook, we can track more than eighteen different manifestations of Blog del Narco. On Twitter, we can join its 100,077 followers. On its YouTube channel, we find 10,969 subscribers and a total of 10,613,684 upload views. Narcos appropriate social media for a variety of purposes; On the right of the above image, we can see where a new cartel held a YouTube “press conference” to announce their mission. The Los Mata Zetas “press conference” received a total of 1,220,906 hits in its first six months.

I've been investigating you for some time now. But since you had kids in your arms, we didn't touch you. That's why we waited until you got to where you were. Doesn't it make you afraid to see your kids exposed?

Yes.

Yes? Why did you do it?

For stupidity.

Being stupid? Or for necessity? Why?

Well, for both. I was alone, and with my small children.

What else do you want to tell us?

What else do you want me to say?

What else do you want to say to the authorities?

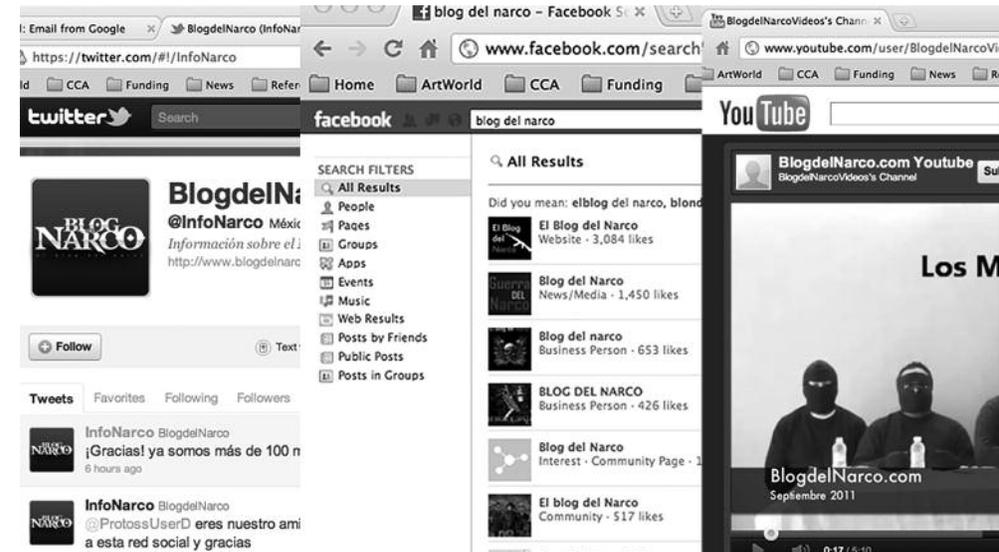
... that I regret—

That you regret it? And for all the dead that there are in Juarez? Do you regret their deaths?

I don't know about that, no—

What does it mean to have to answer the question, “are you a widow, or are you married?” How can someone in Juana's position grapple with, and coherently answer, any question? Perhaps Juana believes she may be saved by her performance of the role of fully agreeable confessor. In many ways, the totality of what we see here is a performance,

Blog del Narco pages on Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube, 2011



by both the victim and the perpetrators. We see costumes and other theatrical cues indicating how we are supposed to read the characters: assault rifles, black balaclavas, military-style uniforms; all equal dominance and legitimacy. Bound limbs, a full confession, and a victim of physical violence: all signal subservience and failed claims to power. Cartels use the visual frame to create the world that they hope to see.

Kidnapping, interrogation, torture, murder, decapitation, and dismemberment are not unprecedented, but the pairing of war and social media is. The digital space is relatively new, and the regulation of violence within it is also relatively new. The scene of Juana's interrogation was clearly produced for the digital camera and the Internet, not for the cartel's personal archive.

Technology itself is a medium with its own properties and conditions of reception, and different technologies precipitate different organizations of power. Narco videos change access to power by bypassing traditional arbiters of visual media and creating direct access to an underground visual language. Social media provides complete access to and control of self-representation. Social media bypasses the state control that normally regulates mass media.

Examining social media as an extension of experience critically questions the role of YouTube as an extension of cartel power. While it is illegal to behead, execute, torture, and maim in physical space, it is not illegal to do so in digital space. What I mean by this is that even though criminal acts were clearly perpetrated against Juana in the video, and the producers of the video are clearly the ones who murdered her, the video itself nevertheless has a potent life on the Internet.

What roles do social media and Internet viewers play in consuming, demanding, and disseminating the cartels' performed acts of violence? Without an audience and medium ready to generate five million views, perhaps the video would not have been produced, and

perhaps Juana might not have been executed. YouTube, however, plays a critical role in transforming her death from another statistic into a tool for social control. Indeed, YouTube enables her murderers to frame their claim to power, enact it in digital space, and disseminate it five million times.

YouTube maintains detailed statistics on their videos, allowing us to directly track the movement of the cartels' physical acts across digital space. Juana's video has 659 "likes" and 603 "dislikes." The majority of the dislikes, however, come from resentment at not being able to see the violence itself. Approximately thirty percent of Mexican citizens have access to the Internet. This video is most popular in Mexico among males ages twenty-five to fifty-four internationally; it is most popular with males ages thirty-five to forty-four. These are not hormonal teenagers watching Juana's execution; they are adult men.

User comments also contribute to our knowledge of these viewers, and situate the presence of Narco torture and execution videos within the larger Mexican social system. The 1,405 comments show that the majority of the viewers agree that Juana deserved to be killed. A significant cross-section laments for the young children she left behind, but very few viewers question whether or not she was actually guilty of the crime for which she was executed. Yet what real evidence has the cartel presented? Juana's murderers have convinced the majority of viewers that she is guilty, and that they are arbiters of justice. The vast majority of viewers buys into the reality constructed by her killers, and expresses belief in her guilt through their comments.

How can we trust the interrogator? There are four instances in the video when a voice whispers Juana's answer before she says it. It is a male voice, almost inaudible. He is prompting her, reminding her of what to say. The interrogators construct and manipulate the dialogue through these whispers. They have rehearsed this scene, and

Juana does her best to repeat what they want to hear. From the direction of the questions to the violent act, the power lies in the hands of the brutal perpetrators who made the video. They drive the narrative, image, and action. As such, they frame the relationships of power enacted in the interrogation room, and on the video screen. Juana is depicted as the immoral extortionist, and the rival cartel members as propagators of justice.

Analysis of the comments posted in response to this and other videos locates three types of viewers: a general audience, viewers with cartel allegiances, and active participants in the cartel conflict. Comments range from “I’m happy. That’s one less pig in the city” to “We are coming for you faggot. We’re going to take you to hell. Attentively: Cartel del Golfo” to “Ex-military with more than 20 years in the business. I offer my services as a hitman, my price per victim in the Mexican Republic starts at 7000 dollars plus travel. . . Completely discreet: call the phone numbers 811-2841291 and 6871080393.” It is very clear that people kill each other in Mexico for profit, but it is shocking to find a classified ad for murder posted as a YouTube video comment. The hitman even leaves two numbers, just in case the first line is busy.

Through these user comments and statistics, it becomes clear that the Narco interrogation and execution videos are not isolated cases of violence shown on the Internet: they are part of a complex social system of violence perpetrated by individuals. How are viewers implicated in this system? Cartels demonstrate that social media can become a platform for the display of power. It is a platform that democratizes media production and directly connects producers to their audience. The audience is the other side of the spectacle. Spectacle requires an audience. Every day, YouTube videos generate three billion views. Translated to people, that means that half the world watches content from this platform every twenty-four hours; that is a very large audience.

At their most basic level, these productions are intended to function as extensions of influence upon enemies, a general public, supporters, and the producers themselves. Enemies are meant to experience fear to the point of submission. The general audience is expected to subjugate itself or turn their support to the producers of the video. The cartel’s supporters are meant to feel bolstered in their allegiance to the perpetrators. Further, such spectacles are also meant to inspire and validate the acting cartel members themselves. With every hack at an opponent’s limb they claim, “we exert power, we arbitrate justice.” In a tense, violent conflict, it certainly augments morale and even calls for conscripts to their cause when they demonstrate the full extent of their power. Like physical space, the Internet is a medium for the transfer of power. In the past decade, digital technology has developed at an unprecedented rate. It follows that the power relationships enacted through digital platforms have also developed at an unprecedented rate. It is an incredibly difficult task to keep up to date with the changes in even prominent social media monoliths such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube. Founded in 2006, 2004, and 2005, respectively, they have amassed a combined total of more than one billion users. This staggering growth—from zero to one billion users in seven years—has been accompanied by dramatic changes in social and power relationships that the world is racing to understand and exploit.

Since social media is created on computers and distributed via computers, computer logic significantly influences the cultural logic of media; that is, violence in digital space influences violence in physical space.⁶ The dissemination of violent acts also facilitates their production. Thus, when cartels directly address each other in their videos, it is clear that responses in this visual dialogue also create a competition to “best” each other. Cartel competition in digital space accelerates violence in physical space. As cartels compete to create

ever more shocking videos, they must also compete to increase the trauma inflicted on their victims' bodies. The violent videos posted on social media create an acceleration of spectacle, with cartels producing increasingly gory and cinematic visualizations in their attempts to best each other in the raw power of their images. The six screen shots at right demonstrate the competitive use of various visual strategies, both design and violence based, to create the strongest spectacle of power in the cartel conflict.

Viewer response to Juana's video on YouTube elucidates a larger system of the spectacle of torture featuring demonstrative violence, or violence whose sole end is the expression of power itself. Desensitization is real. People become inured to violence. The spectacle of violence becomes dulled for both audience and creators; this means that in order to compete for power in this arena, the trauma of the violence represented must also increase. This creates a unique system, powered by digital media, in which increased production of violence also pairs with formal innovations in the visual medium itself.

How is it that these videos stay up? Run by Google, YouTube maintains a self-policing policy. Videos that are flagged can be taken down. Dozens of Narco videos bypass the policy, however, because no one flags them, or they border on not representing the actual violence itself. The more gruesome videos are hosted through other services, notably Google Blogger, which hosts the notorious Blog del Narco. Google Blogger's homepage states: "Create a blog. It's Free." It also entices: "Make money with AdSense . . . we have beautiful, customizable templates and layouts." Digging further into the site, however, one finds Blogger's content warning: "In general, Google does not review nor do we endorse the content of this or any blog. For more information about our content policies, please visit the terms of service."⁷ It is in Google's interest to maintain a policy of "free-access" to its

Six Narco execution videos and platforms demonstrative of competitive developments in video and violent visual strategies 2010–11



sites. Google capitalizes on providing free blog spaces by selling advertisements that are placed on each blog, regardless of its content. Google's profit is, therefore, directly linked to the number of hits on any given blog. Regarding Narco interrogation and execution videos, the more people who view Juana's execution, the more Google profits. The blog organizers profit as well. Blogs run through Google Blogger are small, social media businesses. Web "hits" make money. These videos are part of a globalized system of unregulated web profits that capitalizes on the sensationalism of violence.

Open your eyes to see and know you . . . What happens to the people that don't pay the "taxes"?

They burn their businesses.

And of the street routes? What happens to them?

Well, they kill them.

They kill them, they burn their buses and everything, right? What else? You know well what they do to them.

They kill their families. They burn their homes, their lines.

Their kids. They kill their kids. You have seen it, and you know it because you see it every day in the newspaper.

Yes.

That's the work of La Linea. That you finance, and help with your extortion. Is it true or not. Do you have it in your head?

Yes.

Well? Do you agree? Well? Give me your name and age again.

San Juana Gabriela Enriquez Galván.

Address?

512 Mosillo.

Origin?

From Torreón, Coahuila.

Thank you.

The interrogation and execution of an alleged female extortionist in Ciudad Juárez (continued), 2010. Video clip from TV Azteca, Mexico City, posted on YouTube on October 20, 2010



The YouTube video cuts to a screen that shows Juana face down, on the ground. They have written her back, “I am an extortionist that works for La Linea. . . .” The video then cuts to a fuzzy night scene that appears to be shot from a vehicle, then to a newspaper. The murderers are strategic in creating a visual spectacle. Juana is lying over a curb, hands over her head. There is an extreme amount of blood on either side of her body. They slit her throat and positioned her body above her head so she would completely bleed out onto the street. The newspaper headline reads: “They Place a Rose on an Executed Woman.” The rose itself is one of those gas station roses with clear plastic around the top of the flower. A Narco-corrido plays. It is titled “En Preparación”; it is available for purchase on iTunes.⁸ The other headlines read, “Another Woman is Found in the Same Hour, Fourteen Murdered Yesterday.” Even though fourteen murders occurred that same day, Juana’s murderers were strategic enough in selecting visual cues—the rose, the writing on her back, the excessive blood that pooled in the street as the result of slitting her throat—that they “won” the headline and cover page. In addition, the video they posted on the Internet likely gained five million more views than any other death that day. In other words, they disseminated their message and demonstrated their authority five million times more than any other killers that day. Juana is dead, and she was killed by those that made this video.

Why should individuals outside of Mexico care care about Narco videos? First, the violence here is symptomatic of an unregulated global economy. Over the past six years, over forty thousand violent deaths have been attributed to cartel violence. The United States is one of the largest drug consumers in the world, and Mexicans compete to fulfill this high demand. The violence in Mexico can be further linked to the United States: firearms are illegal there. Ninety percent of the weapons confiscated by Mexican officials in Mexico

come from the border states of Arizona, Nevada, New Mexico and Texas. This means that as part of the Mexican-American drug economy in the border region of El Paso, Texas, and Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, Juana’s captors were competing for American dollars, and that she was killed with an American weapon.

Secondly, we should recall that Juana is a widow, and has two children. Her interrogators tell her, “We’ve been investigating you for some time now. Since you had kids in your arms, we didn’t touch you. That’s why we waited until you got to where you were.” Her children were young enough for her to carry them in her arms at the same time. The interrogators continue, “Doesn’t it make you afraid to see your kids exposed?” “Yes,” she answers, but we should also be afraid to see her children exposed. Not only do these now-orphaned toddlers have to grow up to confront the perils of the most violent city in the world, they represent only one example of the overall violence in Mexico. Let us imagine the realities of these two orphans, and then repeat the process for the families of the other forty thousand victims of the Narco related violence.

It is clear that the visualization of power in Narco interrogation and execution videos is a cornerstone of this visual regime. The critical questions to ask are: How do we respond to the use of virtual space war? And where do we draw the line between free speech and censorship? Digital space is part of a global system of information and media power—the Internet is not an isolated utopia for free information. The struggles for power that occupy the physical world manifest themselves in digital space. The Narco war theater is not limited to local events in Mexico. It has implications for a global community, and for future violent conflicts.

I do not mean to imply that the Internet creates this violence. Narcos would continue to dismember and execute each other with

or without the Internet. What I am arguing is that Narco interrogation and execution videos have become an extension of these power struggles, and this calls for a reconsideration of the relationships among digital and physical space, culture, and violence. Narco interrogation and execution videos set a precedent for the appropriation of social media for warfare. They challenge us to reconsider how we perceive and regulate the power relationships between the digital and physical worlds. They also challenge us to reconsider our participation in and responsibility for digital media. What we can learn through them will directly influence—for better or worse—the future of wars propagated across digital and physical space.

Drawing the line between free speech, journalism, and censorship on the Internet is a perilous task, but it is perhaps wisest to use historical human relationships in physical space to inform the future of human relationships in digital space. One of the key differences between virtual space and physical space is that physical space has been regulated for centuries by social contracts. Over millennia, people have come to laws, constitutions, and understandings that regulate social interaction. For the most part, these agreements do not infringe on individual freedoms; they are a set of understandings that guide us on how to live together while respecting our freedoms. Nascent digital space has not yet developed a social contract. I am not arguing for censorship of the Internet; what I am arguing is that it is time to explore the impact that curtailing digital violence may have on reducing physical violence. The social contract in Mexico has been dissolving for the past five years. This dissolution has infiltrated digital space and led to an unprecedented amount of digitally staged and enabled violence. It is time to stop enabling cartels to kill for the camera.

Notes

- 1 “2010: Year of Fear,” *El Diario de Ciudad Juarez*, January 14, 2011, <http://anuario-periodicoeldiariodejuarez.com.mx/juarez.html>.
- 2 Disinformation is hardly a new idea; it is impossible to prove that Narco videos are produced exclusively by active cartel members. Just because a video is reputed to have been made by a member of a given cartel does not mean it is endorsed by (let alone made by) the cartel itself. We cannot be certain of the authorship of the spectacles of violence in Mexico; especially given the ferocity and invisible battle lines in the competition between the state and splintering cartels. The question of authorship is indeed an important part of this investigation, but for simplicity’s sake I refer to the constituent parties as cartels, knowing that this may in some cases be the work of competing parties such as the military, police, individuals, and rival cartels who are posing as their opponents.
- 3 In Mexico the term “Narco” functions as a prefix that can be attached to anything associated with the drug cartels. Its growing use testifies to the integration of the drug economy and drug culture into the Mexican social fabric. “Narco” can be attached to specific objects; *mantas*, or blankets, have become “Narco” when used as the substrate for threatening messages written by the cartels with the intention of intimidating individuals or the general public. These informal message boards are often left near or attached to dead bodies, and function as a type of Narco public service announcement. “Narco” expands to *Narco tortura* (Narco torture), *Narco bloqueos* (Narco road blocks), and *Narco santos* (Narco saints). With their high drug profits, access to weapons, and power as de facto authority figures, Narcos make staggering claims to cultural and governing political legitimacy. Their multidimensional power fractures into various cultural forms: drugs, weapons, money, sex, and cultural image.
- 4 Joan Grillo, “El Narco: Inside Mexico’s Criminal Insurgency,” October 26, 2011, National Public Radio, <http://www.npr.org/2011/10/26/141659461/reporting-on-the-front-lines-of-mexicos-drug-war>.
- 5 “Mexican Drug Lord on Forbes Most Powerful List,” Fox News, accessed February 2, 2011, <http://latino.foxnews.com/latino/news/2011/11/02/mexican-drug-lord-on-list-most-powerful-people-calderon-not/#ixzz1cemsEOWE>
- 6 Paul Virilio, *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception* (Brooklyn: Verso, 1989), 99–100.
- 7 “Content Warning,” Google Blogger, accessed October 28, 2011, <http://www.blogdelnarco.me/?zx=27182100f47d4997>.
- 8 Gerardo Ortiz, “En Preparación,” part of the album *Ni Hoy Ni Mañana*, released June 29, 2010, by DEL Records. Among other things, Ortiz sings about preparing for combat by donning a black mask and military boots.