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Cultural representations of contemporary Mexican drug culture: Dark humour and irony in relation to the abject

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Abstract

Ever since Felipe Calderón declared the war on drugs at the beginning of his presidency in 2006, violence has drastically permeated Mexican society. In this paper, I will focus on the different uses of dark humour and irony in the representation of the mutilated and abject body in contemporary Mexican culture, especially in literature. Therefore, I will take into consideration the Mexican tradition of humoristic approaches to death, which might seek a cathartic effect in dealing with violence and trauma. I will also link some grotesque representations of violence to the influence of “nouvelle violence” cinema, related to the films of Quentin Tarantino and Robert Rodríguez in the 1990s. I will show how irony is introduced as a critical tool that questions our consumption of violence as distant readers or spectators of the scene of crime.

Keywords: dark humour, irony, narconovela, violence, memory.

On *El Día de los Muertos* (The Day of the Dead, 1 November), Mexicans put chocolate and sugar skulls on the graves of their beloved ones. Representations of *La catrina*, José Guadalupe Posada’s famous print of an elegantly attired and colourful female with a skeleton face, are omnipresent. From a Western perspective, in which death, mourning and trauma are considered to be solemn matters, this rather playful ritual can be difficult to understand. However, the particular playful approach to death and violence is very common in Mexico.

In contemporary Latin American literature, where the impact of violence on society is palpable in various literary genres, humour is also heavily present. For example, in *La virgen de los sicarios* [*Our Lady of the Assassins*] (1994) by Fernando Vallejo, one of the most famous Colombian *narconovelas* or novels about drugs and drug trafficking, the protagonist comments cynically on the violent climate in Medellín: “Las armas de fuego han proliferado y yo digo que eso es progreso, porque es mejor morir de un tiro en el corazón que de un machetazo en la

cabeza” [Guns have proliferated and I say this is progress, because it is better to die by a shot in your heart than by the stroke of a *machete*] (Vallejo 2001: 41; my translation). In *Desvanecidos difuntos* [*All Kinds of Phantoms*] (1990), the Mexican author Taibo II tells the story of his detective, Héctor Belascoarán, who is ordered to investigate a strange murder: the victim is someone he keeps encountering daily on the street, but whom the corrupt Mexican police has decided to declare dead. Even in a novel that tackles the savage dictatorship in Argentina, *Dos veces junio* [*Two Times June*] (2002) by Martín Kohan, anecdotes about the Soccer World Cup in 1978 alternate with extremely harrowing torture scenes that historically took place near the stadium. This ironic contrast denounces violence and its shocking contiguity with everyday life during Videla’s regime.

Surprisingly, the relationship between humour and violence in Latin American literature has never been studied systematically. This is all the more astonishing, since not only their combined presence is undeniable in contemporary Latin American fiction, but also because the political (Aguila 2006; Hutcheon 1994) and the therapeutic (Freud 1905; Garrick 2006) potentials of humour and irony have been frequently emphasized. Moreover, irony’s ambiguity is indeed an excellent weapon to create controversy and to avoid the indifference of official historiography. Through humour (Lauterwein 2009) and through irony’s ‘edge’ (Hutcheon 1994), repressed affectivity might be relieved, and the traumatic impact of violence is more easily dealt with. The relation between irony, humour and the representation of violence in Latin American literature is the object of the broader investigation to which this paper is a contribution.¹

The present paper will focus on the relation between the representation of violence, i.e. the abject body, and black humour/irony in the contemporary Mexican *narconovela*. It will first clarify the significance and relevance of violence and memory studies in the Latin American, and especially the Mexican, context. After a short overview of the way in which memory studies have been dealing with the relation between humour and trauma in the European context, this paper will center on the different hypotheses advanced on the use of humour in the Mexican context, and particularly in the Mexican *narconovela*. The analysis will focus on three contemporary stories about drug trafficking: ‘Ese modo que colma’ by Daniel Sada, *Perra brava* by Orfa Alarcón, and *Fiesta en la madriguera* by Juan Pablo Villalobos, all three published in 2010.

1. Memory and violence in the Latin American context

In Latin America, the impact of violence in the second half of the 20th century was so high that in the 1980s a specific scientific discipline called “violentología” (violence studies) was created to study this phenomenon. Despite the fact that it was originally founded in Colombia, when president Barco created the famous “Commission of Studies on Violence” in 1987 during his campaign against the *narcos* (the drug lords and their associates), the field broadened its scope and began to focus on violence in other parts of the continent as well. Its aim was to study violence from different perspectives, which explains the interdisciplinary collaboration of historians, anthropologists, political and social scientists.²

Nowadays, the field of “violentología” is being relegated to the background, overwhelmed by the growing popularity of memory studies. Mainly in post-dictatorial societies – in the Southern Cone, but also in Central America – the memory paradigm has become a dominant conceptual frame. However, the conceptual framework developed in the context of Holocaust Studies has been critically revised when applied to Latin America. Sarlo’s famous revision of

Marianne Hirsch's concept of "post-memory" in *Tiempo pasado* (2005), for instance, has generated many discussions on the usefulness and necessary adaptations of the terms related with Memory Studies when applied to the memory of post-dictatorships in Latin America.³

In contrast to the enormous impact of the memory paradigm in the context of post-dictatorships, it is striking how rarely we find it in reflections on the Mexican war on drugs. Violence in Mexico increased drastically since Felipe Calderón declared the war on drugs at the beginning of his presidency. Even if the war on drugs was initiated by Nixon with "Operation Intercept" at the end of the 1960s, it had not been enforced with military troops until the governance of Felipe Calderón in 2006. In the six years of his government, there have been 60,000 victims. Peña Nieto's policy from 2012 onwards brought no further relief: during his first year in power, almost 20,000 Mexicans were killed.⁴ One obvious reason for the predominance of the concept of violence in the Mexican context is that the dictatorships in the Southern Cone ended in the 1980s, while the war on drugs in Mexico is still ongoing. How can we speak about memory if things have not come to an end, and we find ourselves still submerged in them?

Another important aspect, however, is the public display of violence in the war on drugs, which contrasts with the more covert strategies of disappearances and concentrations camps, typical of the Southern Cone dictatorships and the Holocaust. While in the Mexican context the voice of the perpetrator seems to take over the public (cyber)space, bragging about acts of cruelty, in the context of the Southern Cone and the Shoah, memory's main source depended on the testimonies of the victims.

2. Expressive crimes and the abject corpse in Mexico

In her recent monograph *Cruel Modernity* (2013), Jean Franco investigates how modernity, related both to the colonial enterprise in the 15th century and the rationalization model developed in the 17th century, was intrinsically linked to violence. Through colonization, slavery and the introduction of developmentalism, Latin America suffered the imposition of modernity in many ways. Focussing on the tragic dictatorships, civil wars, and drug cartels in the 20th century, Franco insists on the omnipresence of what Primo Levi called "useless violence", defined as "those cruelties that were inflicted on those who would die in any case" (2013: 13). However, if the concept of "useless violence" refers to its unnecessary, arbitrary character, this does not mean that violence is useless in the sense of not being effective. Indeed, cruelty is deployed also as a means of claiming iconic power. For example, in relation to the Civil War in El Salvador, Aldo Lauria-Santiago states that "[t]he attack on sexual organs, even after the victim's death, and decapitation – apparently practiced in a slaughterhouse with specialized equipment – were methods of torture that established their own goals and justification and provided the security agencies and rightist groups with iconic power far beyond the tactical elimination of people perceived as activists or revolutionaries." (quoted in Franco 2013: 14.)

Franco perceives many uses of cruelty throughout the continent, based on ideological motivations (for example in the Southern Cone's dictatorships), racial grounds (in Guatemala's Civil Wars), gender motives (especially the femicides in Ciudad Juárez, the border region between Mexico and the US), or a combination of the three. However, she states, the iconic dimension of cruelty was especially prominent during the period of La Violencia in Colombia, and later on these practices "passed with the drug traffic into Mexico, where cruelty is at its most extreme and where the expressive use of the cadaver has become common practice, a form of macabre theatre addressed not only to rivals but also to the public." (Franco 2013: 14–15). In that

sense, instead of Levi's concept of "useless violence", strongly related to his experiences in Auschwitz where violence was obviously useful for the perpetrators in the context of the camps, but was conspicuously kept secret from the outside world, Franco proposes the notion of "expressive crimes" in the Mexican context:

Expressive crimes are those in which bodies illustrate the logic of the killers. In the case of the murdered women in Ciudad Juárez, it is clear that, as female workers in Mexican assembly plants, they disrupted what had been a sexual division of labor. The mutilated and beheaded male bodies, on the other hand, are revenge killings that speak of treachery and betrayal. Thus both the murder of women and the beheading of males intentionally publicize the persistence of archaic codes.

(Franco 2013: 21.)

The particular aspect of the recent cruelty related to the war on drugs is characterized by the public display of violence and the use of the mutilated, abject body as a means of communication. Indeed, the presence of mutilated bodies in Mexican daily life became overwhelming with Calderón's administration: in the areas that are most affected by the war between drug gangs, especially the northern states, it is not unusual to see corpses exposed in public spaces, often accompanied by *narcomantas*, messages left by the drug lords warning their enemies of upcoming violent actions. In other parts of Mexico, like the capital Mexico City, the violence related to the war on drugs is also ubiquitous, but rather through the sensational representation of mutilated corpses in the daily and weekly press. In that sense, in Mexico we are confronted with a kind of overexposure of the dead body, of the mutilated corpse. This overexposure of the abject corpse stands in stark contrast to the absence of the cadavers of the missing persons in post-dictatorial Chile or Argentina. Such an overexposure has two dimensions: on the one hand, the criminals enjoy the use of the corpses as a form of iconic power and a method to spread terror amongst the population. On the other hand, the national and international media are especially keen on reproducing these images, and the fascination they apparently exercise can be gauged from their wide circulation in the written press, television, or social media such as *YouTube*, with videos of executions showing high viewer numbers, and weblogs specializing in news facts related to drug criminality.⁵ In *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Julia Kristeva describes the abject dimension of the corpse as follows:

The corpse (or cadaver: *cadere*, to fall), that which has irremediably come a cropper, is cesspool, and death; it upsets even more violently the one who confronts it as fragile and fallacious chance. A wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay, does not *signify* death. In the presence of signified death – a flat encephalograph, for instance – I would understand, react, or accept. No, as in true theatre, without make-up or masks, refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border.

(Kristeva 1982 [1980]: 3.)

In other words, Kristeva indicates that the corpse does not merely signify death, but rather reminds us constantly of what we discard to allow ourselves to live. The morbid corpses are

examples of the abject, in the sense that they might be “a vortex of summons and repulsions” in the same breath, producing the effect of an “inescapable boomerang” (Kristeva 1982 [1980]: 1), being perceived simultaneously as repulsing and intriguing. In that sense, the abject might produce a sensation of discomfort, and this is where laughter and humour come into play. As Kristeva states: “laughing is a way of placing or displacing abjection” (1982 [1980]: 8).

3. Memory Studies and humour: the case of the Holocaust

Indeed, laughter, jokes and humour are often used as strategies to distance ourselves from violence, to cope with trauma. In general, the cathartic functions of humour have not been very highly appreciated in connection with the Holocaust. According to Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, for example, laughter is a sign of barbarism, a lack of civilization; it is “the sign of force, of the breaking out of blind and obdurate nature” (1972: 77).⁶ In relation to fascism in particular, Adorno’s attitude is somehow ambiguous. On the one hand, he argues that a sense of humour would have been healthy in Germany, and possibly would have avoided Hitler’s domination: “Even merely without the German seriousness, [...] Hitler could not have flourished. In the Western countries, where the rules of society are more deeply ingrained in the masses, he would have been laughed at” (Adorno 2005: 208–209). On the other, elsewhere he states that fascism was completely incompatible with laughter:

Several years ago there was a debate about whether fascism could be presented in comic or parodistic form without that constituting an outrage against its victims. The silly, farcical, second-rate quality is unmistakable, the kinship between Hitler and his followers on the one hand and the gutter press and stool pigeons on the other. One cannot laugh at it.

(Adorno 1992: 251–252.)

According to Adorno, then, only in very specific circumstances is laughter allowed and able to subvert violence.

Surprisingly, the paradigm of Memory Studies (Caruth 1995; Felman 2002) hasn’t paid much attention to humour or irony either. Lauterwein’s volume *Rire, mémoire, Shoah* (2009) can be considered a first attempt to explore the field. She insists on the presence and relevance of laughter in the memory of the Shoah and states in her “warning”:

Avertissement: (...) Quelles que soient son origine et sa vocation, le rire, même traversé par la catastrophe, risque d’éluder l’indignation profonde. Nous sommes conscientes de ce risque. L’étude du mode comique face à la Shoah touche aux limites des convenances d’une mémoire soucieuse de fonder des valeurs sur la base de la connaissance d’une négativité absolue. (...) L’ambivalence intrinsèque du rire contribue-t-elle à soutenir une culture du dissensus, salutaire pour la perpétuation de la mémoire? Comment faire face à l’indifférence des générations futures sans pour autant les entraîner dans une névrose de culpabilité? (...) Le rire peut-il libérer certains affects bloqués, pour engager à un travail de mémoire? (...) A l’intérieur de ce champ, par quelles techniques du rire les oeuvres artistiques interrogent-elles les convenances mémorielles? Peuvent-elles, au-delà de leur évidente fonction cathartique pour l’auteur, opérer comme un mode de transmission efficace de la mémoire?

[Warning: (...) whatever may be its origin and its vocation, laughter, even confronted to disaster, risks eluding profound indignation. We are aware of this risk. The study of the comic mode in relation to the Shoah touches upon the limits of the convenience of a memory concerned with the establishment of values on the basis of the knowledge of an absolute negativity. (...) Does the intrinsic ambiguity of laughter contribute to sustain a culture of dissent, useful for the perpetuation of memory? How to deal with the indifference of future generations without saddling them with a neurotic sense of guilt? (...) Can laughter release certain blocked affects in order to proceed to a labour of memory? (...) And within this field, which modes of laughter are used by artistic works to question memory's social standards? And can these modes, beyond their evident cathartic function for the author, operate as an efficient method for the transmission of memory?]

(Lauterwein 2009: 6; my translation.)

Lauterwein highlights the therapeutic potential of laughter as well as its social and controversial effects. In that sense, Freud's theory on the cathartic effects of jokes, as elaborated in *Der Witz* (1905), is expanded to incorporate laughter. Through these rhetorical questions, Lauterwein suggests that laughter allows the consolidation of discursive communities and the release of accumulated tensions and emotions. Moreover, she states that laughter could contribute to the questioning of established versions of history. In other words, laughter creates the dissension that is necessary to perpetuate memory.

However, there are diverse examples in which humour, laughter, and irony have been used to represent the Holocaust, and they have caused quite some commotion, like the films *La vita è bella* by Roberto Benigni (1997) and *Inglourious Basterds* (2009) by Quentin Tarantino, or the *Lego Concentration Camp Set* by the Polish artist Libera (1996). All of these cases have received harsh criticism and have opened up an intense ethical debate on the conditions under which we can approach such a traumatic event as the Holocaust in a playful way. In this context it is interesting to see that Adorno's arguments are still very much alive amongst critics. For example, Adorno stated that “[i]n the cultural industry, jovial denial” [we could add “humour”] “takes the place of the pain found in ecstasy and in asceticism” (141), and both *La vita è bella* and *Inglorious Basterds* have been criticised on these grounds.⁷ Libera's installations, on the other hand, were not exactly considered as a denial, but as a playful – though painful and uncomfortable – confrontation of the sharp division between victims and perpetrators (Alphen 2002).

4. Humour and violence in Mexico

In Latin America, the presence of humour in memory engaged with the dictatorships in the Southern Cone, the civil wars in Central America and the drug wars in Colombia and Mexico is still less prominent than in the context of the Holocaust, both in the cultural and the academic field. A logical reason would be that these experiences of violence in the subcontinent are recent, or even ongoing, as in Mexico.

However, at first sight, Mexico might be considered as a particular case. It is well known that in Mexican culture there exists a tradition of approaching death in a less solemn, more festive way. The character of Death has been famously represented as La Catrina, an elegant lady with a huge hat, like in José Guadalupe Posada's drawings from the nineteenth century. In general, the Day of the Dead in Mexico is an occasion for many festivities. Sugar skulls are sold

everywhere; people take food to the graves, sing and party to remember the dead in a cheerful and often humorous way. Octavio Paz, one of Mexico's leading intellectuals who died in 1998, stated the following in his famous essay *El laberinto de la soledad* (1950):

[p]ara el mexicano moderno la muerte carece de significación. Ha dejado de ser tránsito, acceso a otra vida más vida que la nuestra. Pero la intrascendencia de la muerte no nos lleva a eliminarla de nuestra vida diaria. Para el habitante de Nueva York, París o Londres, la muerte es la palabra que jamás se pronuncia porque quema los labios. El mexicano, en cambio, la frecuenta, la burla, la acaricia, duerme con ella, la festeja, es uno de sus juguetes favoritos y su amor más permanente.

[For the modern Mexican death does not signify anything. It has ceased to be a transition, a gateway to another life livelier than our own. But the insignificance of death does not compel us to remove it from our daily lives. For the residents of New York, Paris or London, death is a word that is never uttered because it burns the lips. The Mexican, on the contrary, frequents it, tricks it, caresses it, sleeps with it, celebrates it, it is one of his favourite toys and his most permanent love.]

(Paz 1998: 193; my translation.)

Indirectly, Paz is positive about laughter since it allows Mexicans to deal with death in a more informal and relaxed way. In other words, the intimate relation between death and laughter would be key to the Mexican idiosyncrasy, and would have a healing and cathartic effect since it allows a more natural way of standing in life.

However, not all Mexicans attach such a positive connotation to laughter. Jorge Portilla, for example, continued the reflections by Octavio Paz on the idiosyncrasy of the Mexican use of humour, but from a different perspective. In his chronicles, written mainly in the 1950s and collected posthumously as one essay under the title *Fenomenología del relajo* in 1966, he does not focus on the relation between laughter and death specifically, but rather introduces a new term to reflect on the particular uses of humour in Mexican society. The concept of “relajo”, which is generally not translated in English, is similar to the verb “relajar”, meaning “to relax”, and is used to denominate a typically Mexican phenomenon characterized by a kind of irreverent humour, consisting in the sudden suspension of seriousness, accompanied by laughter, mocking, and irreverent observations. If Portilla initially defines it rather positively as “that form of repeated and sometimes loud collective joking that emerges sporadically in the daily life of our country” (2012: 123), Carlos Alberto Sánchez correctly adds that later he reformulates it as a kind of broader condition, “which is at the root of the lack of community, solidarity, and responsibility that Portilla believes defines modern Mexico, and, more broadly, as I will argue, modernity in general.” (2012: 7). Portilla's definition of “relajo” can be summarized as “the [humoristic] suspension of a determinate event through a repetitious interruption of the values which hold it together” (2012: 8). In other words, humour is useful in that it might bring some relief and release affectivity: in situations related with death, for example, the abrupt introduction of laughter allows to suspend seriousness. On the other hand, however, humour might be disturbing since according to Portilla it implies a lack of community and solidarity, without proposing a new set of values or any sense of community instead.

Without any doubt, Gabriela Warkentin is pointing at this ambiguity in ‘¿De qué te acuerdas cuando ríes, Mexicano?’ [‘What do you remember when you are laughing, Mexican?'], published in *El País* in 2009. In the article, written shortly after the brutal murder of a police officer by some members of a drug-related organization in a popular snack bar in the centre of

Mexico City, she focuses on the many jokes being told about this tragic event and defends the cathartic potential of laughter in tragic circumstances. She explains this tendency to use humour in a context of war in the following way:

O nos seguimos riendo, o nos carga la realidad. Porque para sobrellevar las cosas en este querido México se necesita, qué duda cabe, una dosis de inconsciencia, algo de caradura, una pizca de cinismo y mucho, mucho, muchísimo sentido del humor. Pero de ese humor que dignifica, ¡vaya!, porque la risa tonta como que tampoco.

[Either we go on laughing, or we are demolished by reality. Because in order to carry on with things in this beloved Mexico, one needs, without any doubt, a dose of thoughtlessness, some insolence, a bit of cynicism and lots and lots of humour. But the kind of humour that dignifies, of course, because stupid laughter doesn't bring us any further.]

(Warkentin 2009; my translation.)

However, her point of view might be also contested, as she observes:

Por supuesto no a todos place este sentido del humor, que se va haciendo cada vez más negro. No reconoce el dolor humano y es de mal gusto, argumentan; no respeta a las víctimas ni advierte la profundidad del drama, reclaman. Lo cual puede ser cierto. Pero más que excusarlo, yo lo entiendo como necesaria válvula de escape de las tensiones de una sociedad que se siente agraviada, se sabe dolida y se reconoce poco atendida por quienes debieran velar por su bienestar. Lo han dicho todos, desde Bajtín hasta Žižek, de Paz a Portilla, y hasta Serrat pues: cuando la verdad ha perdido sentido, la única forma de expresarla es a través del chiste, y con la risa que subvierte.

[Of course not everybody likes this kind of humour that becomes blacker each time. It does not acknowledge human pain and it is in bad taste, they argue; it does not respect the victims and it does not engage with the depth of the drama, they advocate. But instead of excusing it, I prefer to understand it as a necessary outlet for the tensions of a society that feels wronged, that knows it has been wounded and that believes it has been let down by those who should watch for their well being. Many have said it, from Bajtín to Žižek, from Paz to Portilla, and even Serrat: when truth loses its meaning, we can only express ourselves through jokes, and through the kind of laughter that subverts.]

(Warkentin 2009; my translation.)

Unlike Portilla, Warkentin seems to suggest that humour does create a kind of community, and does not necessarily imply a lack of solidarity with the victims. Of course, as it already became clear from Lauterwein and Adorno's comments, when we deal with laughter and humour, or irony, it is all the more crucial to know which discursive communities are implied: who is laughing exactly, from which position, and who is the target of this laughter? In that sense, not only the victims resort to jokes, even the perpetrators of drug violence are keen on using humour. As Ed Vulliamy reminds us, the cartel "La Línea" took to publishing "the names of police officers it was about to execute on public *narcomantas*. A list of twenty-six officers was posted at a dog-racing track just before Christmas 2008, above the bodies of four [executed]

civilians, one of them wearing a Santa Claus hat” (Vulliamy 2010: 125). Distasteful as it might be, this example is not isolated, but it might be sufficient to demonstrate this point.

In the following section I will leave behind the use of jokes and sardonic humour in daily Mexican life in order to focus on the representation of expressive crimes and the abject body in the Mexican *narconovela*. The main question will be how humour is introduced in these novels: does it have a cathartic, therapeutic function? Is it community binding or is it disrupting?

5. The Mexican *narconovela*

Originally, the Mexican *narconovela* was part of the regionalist literature of the North of Mexico. In the beginning of the 1990s, novels by Northern authors such as Elmer Mendoza, Leónidas Alfaro, or Gernardo Cornejo were published by local publishing houses with a very poor distribution outside that region. However, as Diana Palaversich remarked (2012), drug culture steadily extended all over the country since the 1990s; likewise, literature on drug trafficking attracted the attention of transnational editorial groups like Planeta, Alfaguara, Mondadori, and Tusquets. These publishing houses started marketing the literature of the North related to drug trafficking as the new flavour of Mexican literature, as the most recent expression of “la exótica barbarie latinoamericana” [the exotic Latin American barbarity].

The negative perception of the *narconovela* as a merely commercial genre, appealing to exotic violence and without genuine literary aspirations, was famously formulated ten years ago by Rafael Lemus in his much commented essay “Balas de salva,” published in *Letras libres* in 2005:

¿Cómo narrar el narcotráfico? Otra pregunta sin respuesta. [...]. Se escribe, se hacen novelas, se es del norte. Tanto entusiasmo es norteño y, con más precisión, fronterizo. Desde allá se escribe una literatura que alude irreparablemente al narco. Es imposible huir: el narcotráfico lo avasalla todo y toda escritura sobre el norte es sobre el narcotráfico. [...] Toda mesa de novedades está sitiada por el narco, algún día será tomada por su literatura.

[How to narrate drug trafficking? Another question without an answer. [...] People write, people do novels, people are from the North. So much enthusiasm is northern, or, more precisely, from the border. The literature written there inevitably alludes to drug trafficking. It's impossible to flee: drug dealing engulfs everything and all the writing about the north is writing about drug dealing. [...] Every new releases table in every bookstore is besieged by drug trafficking, one day it will be occupied by its literature.]

(Lemus 2005; my translation.)

One of the symptoms of the aesthetic poverty of the *narconovela*, according to Lemus, was its keenness for realist aesthetics. In his view, writers like Elmer Mendoza made an effort to reproduce the idiolect of the gangs, and offered a picturesque portrait of Northern Mexico, but continued a traditional poetics, without much room for innovation.

However, more than the so-called literary quality of the works, the feature that disturbed many critics even more was its morbidity. Indeed, the Mexican *narconovela* contains a spectacular and almost morbid display of the abject corpse, in contrast to the post-dictatorial

fiction from Chile or Argentina, where the corpses, the haunting spectres of the disappeared, are mainly absent. This abject corpse and violence in general, is sometimes represented in a playful way. We already pointed to the large cultural tradition of humour in the context of death and seriousness in Mexico, and its cathartic effects. However, Marco Kunz also pointed to the centrality of the grotesque in the representation of violence from a different point of view:

Como el asesinato es una realidad cotidiana y se da por sentado que, en la gran mayoría de los casos, se relaciona con las actividades delictivas del crimen organizado, entre las que el narcotráfico y el pollerismo ocupan el lugar más importante, la muerte violenta pierde su excepcionalidad y es a menudo objeto de un tratamiento literario irrespetuoso, frívolo, burlón, relativizador y/o grotescamente hiperbólico. La capitulación de la sociedad ante el crimen omnipresente repercute en una profanación de la muerte en la literatura, una indiferencia moral y emocional ante las brutalidades narradas.

[Since murder is a daily reality and it is generally assumed that, in the majority of the cases, it is related with the illegal activities of organized crime, amongst which drug and human trafficking are dominant, violent death loses its exceptionality, and its treatment in literature is often disrespectful, frivolous, funny, belittling and/or grotesquely hyperbolic. The capitulation of society to pervasive crime results in a profanation of death in literature, a moral and emotional indifference towards the narrated brutalities.]

(Kunz 2012: 139; my translation.)

According to Kunz, the moral and emotional indifference might be explained as a symptom of the general capitulation to crime in Mexico. However, one could surmise that the aesthetics of violence in these novels are also indebted to the huge influence of the *nouvelle violence* movement, introduced by Quentin Tarantino in the 1990s, in which violence is often represented in a trivial, grotesque and comic way. The films by Robert Rodríguez (*El mariachi*, *Desperado*, *Once Upon a Time in Mexico*), or the television series *Breaking Bad* are American productions that use a similar aesthetics in relation to the war on drugs. It is striking that while some novels embrace this comic approach to violence, Mexican cinema seems rather to prefer melodrama (*Miss Bala*, 2011, dir. Gerardo Naranjo) or harsh realism (*Heli*, 2013, dir. Amat Escalante).⁸

In many *narconovelas*, then, the traumatic impact of the drug war seems to be present in a mediated way; this mediation could be explained in the first place by the absence of witness participants in the literary field (as Kunz explains, the writers are not affected by drug violence). It is striking, indeed, that autobiography, or autofiction, seems to be lacking in these narratives, contrary to what happens in the post-dictatorial fiction from Chile or Argentina, for example. There is also the mediation of geographical distance, as for most Mexicans living in the capital the war on drugs used to occur exclusively in the north of the country, and only recently in more central states like Guerrero (it is impossible not to remember the tragic end of the students of Ayotzinapa in this context). This means that most Mexicans are confronted with drug violence mainly in an indirect, mediated way, and particularly through images of violence on television, the internet, or in newspapers and magazines.

In short, different explanations for the use of humour in relation to violence in the cultural and literary Mexican context can be distinguished: as a typically Mexican response to death and seriousness (Paz and Portilla), as a means of catharsis (cf. Warkentin), as an expression of general indifference and capitulation to crime (Kunz), and as an adoption of globalized and

commodified representations of hyperbolic filmic violence (the *nouvelle violence* movement) or sensational media violence (its coverage on TV and the internet).

6. Dark humour and irony in Sada, Alarcón, and Villalobos

In what follows, I will briefly analyse a Mexican short story and two novels that deal with the war on drugs, and I will revise the different functions of humour as they appear in these narratives.

The use of dark humour in the approach to the abject body is an essential feature of ‘Ese modo que colma’ (2010), a short story by Daniel Sada (b. 1953) and seems to fulfil a cathartic function. Sada tells us a hilarious story about the efforts made by a group of women to preserve as well as possible the heads of three murdered *narcos* found in a fridge during a party. In fact, this is a reference to what really happened in the North of Mexico, where several heads of victims were deposited in a refrigerator. As Gabriela Warkentin writes in her article, this provoked a running gag in Mexico: when you had someone visiting you, before opening the fridge, you would ask “What do you want, cabeza o cerveza [a head or a beer]?” Indeed, the narrator uses the same joke, when he describes the content of the fridge, stressing in addition the technical dexterity of the beheaders: “tres cabezas despeinadas, ¡tres decapitaciones increíblemente bien hechas! Tres: ¡sí!: tres, y la rima: y la rima: cervezas-cabezas: tal paradoja” [three heads with messed up hair, three incredibly well executed beheadings! Three: yes! Three, and the rhyme: cervezas-cabezas] (Sada 2010: 169).

Later, the widows of the men start cutting ice to avoid the decomposition of the heads, because “al paso de las horas ya habían adquirido un aspecto monstruoso, además de oler bastante mal” [with the passing of the hours they already looked like monsters, not to mention the appalling smell] (Sada 2010: 173). While the heads are protected as best as possible by one of the widows, the others start looking for three coffins with the appropriate measures, which turns out to be an extremely difficult quest. When they finally succeed and the heads are buried, the corpses of the three men appear. Finally, the women decide to burn the corpses, an act which is described as an “extinción traducida en limpieza” [extinction translated into cleanliness] (Sada 2010: 181).

In this story, then, dark humour focuses more on the body than on the personality, if we want to adopt Thorson’s categories (1985): it is the prowess with which the heads are cut, the absurd quest for the head sized coffins, and the abrupt appearance of the remaining parts of the corpses, that come across as comical and hilarious. Sada’s (2010) narration can be linked back to Warkentin’s observations, who insisted on the use of jokes and dark humour as “a necessary outlet for the tensions of a society that feels wronged, that knows it has been wounded, and that believes it has been let down by those who should watch for their well being”.

The first of the two novels is *Perra brava* (2010) by Orfa Alarcón (b. 1979), an exceptional narrative because both the author and the first person narrator are women, although no autobiographical or auto-fictional link is suggested. It tells the story of Fernanda Salas, who recalls her love affair with Julio Cortés, the leader of a group of hit-men, and the excitement, the attraction, and even the addiction she feels when she is treated in a violent, derogatory way by Julio, and of how she in turn becomes an extremely violent person herself.

We find several episodes that focus on the abject body without any comical dimension. But then something interesting happens when Julio makes love to Fernanda after having rubbed himself with the blood of one of his victims. Now, the abject body of the gang leader, covered

with his victim's blood, might be construed as a reference to the Aztecs' similar traditions, which would imply that the protagonist is claiming his indigenous roots. Fernanda is totally disgusted by the smell, the touch and taste of blood, and afterwards spends a whole day in the bathtub, trying to calm down and get clean:

Si fuera una Barbie de plástico, hubiera podido lacerarme sin mirar una gota de sangre, abrirme la piel, desollarme, y mi cuerpo al fin respiraría. Pero no lo era. Mis fluidos estaban conmigo y ahí debían quedarse. Punto. Esa debía ser la definición de 'contenerse': todo mi cuerpo contenía a Fernanda. Mi cuerpo era una olla exprés que no debía dejar salir nada. (...) Si te permitieses fluir, no resistirías la tentación de vaciarte completa: dejarías ir toda tu agua, toda tu sangre, te escurrirías por los mosaicos, te irías por la coladera.

[If I were a plastic Barbie, I could have lacerated myself without seeing a drop of blood, I could have opened my skin, peel it off, and my body finally would respire. But I wasn't. My fluids were with me and had to stay there. Final point. That should be the definition of 'to contain oneself': my entire body contained Fernanda. My body was a pressure cooker that didn't let anything escape. (...) If you would allow yourself to flow, you wouldn't resist the temptation to empty yourself completely: you would let go all your water, all your blood, you would slip away through the mosaics, you would go through the colander.]

(Alarcón 2010: 23.)

As the quote illustrates, the young girl feels nauseated by the abject blood of the victim to the extent that she feels tempted to mutilate herself. However, the perspective of her own body becoming abject, of the fluids oozing out of her body, is even worse. She would like to be made out of plastic so she could injure herself without being confronted with her own abject dimension.

The abject body is again crucial in a passage where the head of a murdered policeman is found and shown on television. The policeman previously had tried to arrest Fernanda, and as a consequence Julio decided to punish him in a cruel way. What is striking is that Fernanda hears about the vengeance through the media: she is having her breakfast in the early morning while watching television, and she describes the image in a rather shocked way, not comical at all:

Que le habían sacado los ojos. La cabeza había sido desprendida del cuerpo y no de tajo, sino mostrando grandes signos de violencia. La piel de la cara mostraba señales de tortura. El cuero cabelludo había sido arrancado en algunas partes. Una cortada que iniciaba en la oreja y terminaba en la comisura de los labios rebanaba en dos su mejilla, como si le hubiera salido otra boca. La cabeza fue dejada como mensaje frente a la PFP, el cuerpo aún no se encontraba.

[That the eyes had been gouged out. The head had been detached from the body, and not chopped off, but clearly showing signs of violence. The skin of the face showed marks of torture. The scalp had been pulled off in some parts. A cut from the ear to the corner of the mouth sliced his cheek in two, as if another mouth had appeared. The head was left as a message in front of the PFP, the body was still missing.]

(Alarcón 2010: 87.)

However, immediately afterwards, the narrator leaves the emotions behind and continues with a rather dry, distant, and even frivolous description of how these images of “expressive crime” might induce complete indifference among the majority of spectators. In the following quote, the confrontation between the inhabitants of the city, still in pyjamas, and the image of the mutilated head on television is characterized by a complete lack of empathy and produces a comical effect:

Fue reconocido por la dentadura: el comandante Ramiro Silva se había vuelto famoso de la noche a la mañana. Amanecía y la ciudad desayunaba teniendo enfrente huevos estrellados, salsa catsup y unas cavidades vacías de ojos mirándola fijamente.

[He was recognised by his teeth: the commandant Ramiro Silva became famous overnight. The sun came up and the city took its breakfast with fried eggs, ketchup, and some empty eye sockets watching its inhabitants closely.]

(Alarcón 2010: 87.)

Indeed, this paragraph introduces dark humour as it makes fun of something essentially tragic. Dark humour often combines with irony, by virtue of creating a contrast between a tragic fact (the commandant’s death) and the comical way in which it is treated (he becomes famous overnight). In the last sentence, the displacement from the plate of food towards the head is also ironical, since it implies a juxtaposition of heterogeneous elements: the fried eggs, the ketchup and “some empty eye sockets” are enumerated together. Not only their incompatibility is emphasized, but also the use of “some” is ironical since it loosens the metaphorical relation, which is simultaneously established between the fried eggs and the empty eye sockets. The personalisation of these empty sockets, “watching its inhabitants closely”, is again ironical, through the evident contrast between the *emptiness* of the sockets and the activity of watching *closely*. For a moment, it feels as though we are watching a scene from Tarantino’s *Pulp Fiction* (1994). In this passage – but not in the whole of the novel, as was clearly shown in the previous examples – the abject head is presented as if in a funny film or media spectacle, where everything seems unreal and humour really expresses a kind of emotional indifference (Kunz 2012).

In the second novel, *Down the Rabbit Hole* (2010) by Juan Pablo Villalobos (b. 1973), the spectacle of violence is observed through the perspective of the child narrator, who is living with his father, an important drug lord, in a kind of fortified palace. Generally, the boy is characterised by a naive gaze, which is a traditional and well-known device of irony at least since *Candide*, written by Voltaire in 1759. What is so striking about this novel is the very lucid, apparently innocent and naive way in which this small boy describes his own environment, often lacking any emotion. Sometimes, he just turns out to be really naive, like when he wonders what his father and a beautiful young woman might be doing together, “[s]ometimes they disappear and then reappear, really mysterious” (2010, 269), or when the doctor says the boy is sick because he needs a mother, he discards it as follows: “Supposedly this is what’s called a psychosomatic illness, which means the illness is in the mind. But my mind isn’t ill, my brain has never hurt.” (2010, 429–430.) He is not supposed to see any violence – women are continuously cleaning, once again emphasising hygiene, weapons are hidden behind closed

doors, the tigers make sure no body parts are left over – but just like a real detective he discovers details that are indicative of the violence of his environment. However, his most flagrant encounter with violence occurs through the television, when he sees a dismembered head, probably the result of his father’s deeds, which leaves him curiously insensitive:

Today there was an enigmatic corpse on the TV: they cut off his head and he wasn’t even a king. It didn’t look like it was the work of the French either, who like cutting off heads so much. The French put the heads in a basket after cutting them off. I saw it in a film. They put a basket just under the king’s head in the guillotine. Then the French let the blade fall and the king’s head is cut off and lands in the basket. That’s why I like the French so much, they’re so refined. As well as taking off the king’s crown so it doesn’t get dented, they take care that his head doesn’t roll away from them. [...]

We Mexicans don’t use baskets when we cut off heads. We hand over the severed heads in a crate of vintage brandy. Apparently this is very important, because the man on the news repeated over and over that the head had been delivered in a crate of vintage brandy. The head was from the corpse of a policeman, the chief of all the policemen or something like that. Nobody knows where the other parts of the corpse went.

On the TV they showed a photo of the head and the truth is he had a really bad hairstyle. He had long hair with a few strands dyed blond, pathetic.

(Villalobos 2010 372–387.)

The use of the naive perspective of the boy is striking, and ironically underscores the insensitivity produced through the mediated images of “expressive crime”. Tochtli seems to have interiorized violence, considering it as a natural and normal phenomenon. His lack of empathy and distant, cold way of describing a corpse on television is striking. The ambiguity between the child’s innocent gaze on the one hand, and his ‘hygienic’, cold and distant discourse on violence on the other, produces an awkward feeling in the reader. The naive gaze turns out to be not so naive; the boy seems to have interiorized violence as a normal aspect of life. In the last sentence of the novel, moreover, the complicity between the boy and his father is clearly suggesting Tochtli’s definitive integration in the lifestyle of his father’s gang.

In short, the naive stance of the boy in combination with his lack of sensitivity produces an ironical contrast, which implies a critical stance towards the immunizing effects of mediated violence on television. Just like in *Perra brava*, through the use of dark humour and irony Villalobos’ novel underscores the intensity of the numbing effect produced by the mediation of violence. At the same time, however, *Fiesta en la madriguera* also proposes a critical reflection on the more global frame in which this violence “made in Mexico” is situated. Indeed, the novel alludes frequently to the violence of colonialism and of modernity: as the narrator observes several times, the French cut off as many heads as the Mexicans, they only did it with more sophistication and left them in a basket instead of in a box of brandy. Irony, in this novel, is used precisely to criticize the exotic spectacle of violence as it is present both in Mexican and international media, and sometimes in literature itself, as a stereotype of Mexican culture dating back to the Aztecs.⁹

7. Conclusions

The Mexican *narconovela* often represents abject corpses and expressive crimes in such a way that cruelty and humour are being combined. In some cases, dark humour is used as a way to come to terms with atrocity, to displace the abject, and has a therapeutic or cathartic function. As Felipe Oliver Krafczyk affirms in *Apuntes para una poética de la narcoliteratura*, the destruction of the body is a recurrent motive in the *narconovela*, which cannot be understood without its human and social dimension (2013: 22). In other words, the abject body, in a state of decomposition, is often used as a metaphor for the destruction of the social structure, or, we could add, for the absence of a sense of community. In that context, Daniel Sada uses dark humour to tell us the hilarious story of three abject heads that seem to resist the women's efforts to bury them. The search of the right coffins involving a whole village becomes a humoristic way of coming to terms with horror, creating a new sense of community through laughter.

Besides the use of dark humour as a means of catharsis, the humoristic approach to death might be due to an emotional and moral indifference or impotence (Kunz 2012). Maybe the explanation for this indifference can be found in the essentially mediated, indirect way in which violence is generally experienced in Mexico. Indeed, the absence of autobiographical voices in the literary field might explain this frivolous approach towards violence. Moreover, in the perception of many Mexicans, the war on drugs is fought exclusively in the north of the country, without impacting their daily lives, except for the images of violence in the mass media. In consequence, television plays a leading role in many *narconovelas*, as the main vehicle through which violence is transmitted, especially the spectacular violence of mutilated and abject corpses. It is this grotesque, abject representation of the corpse by Mexican media, as well as the spectacle this violence implies, which is treated with dark humour and a critical irony in Orfa Alarcón's and Juan Pablo Villalobos's novels.

Even though the discussed novels are not examples of "activism" in a strict sense, dark humour and irony are important ways to improve the sense of community, to bring about memory and to cope with violent images and facts. As Cecilia Sosa once stated in the Argentinean context, dark humour in these Mexican novels should not be considered merely as a form of light entertainment. At least in the narratives discussed in this article, "it becomes a strategy and even a platform of resistance, refusal and creation. Dark humour sticks. [...] Thus, it emerges as a form of *doing*, a form of connection, submission and getting undone by grief. Far from leaving the past behind, dark humour works as a form of recovery and even of conversion" (2013: 84). In that sense, since laughing is essentially a social phenomenon, it is not only, as Kristeva argues, "a way of placing or displacing abjection" (1982 [1980]: 8), but also a way of performing this displacement through community.

Notes

¹ This paper is part of my VIDI-project 'The Politics of Irony in Contemporary Latin American Literature on Violence', financed by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO), 2011–2016.

² For an excellent overview of the "violentología" and its interdisciplinarity, see Rueda 2008. It is symptomatic that Rueda's article uses the word "memory" only once, and only in a quote.

³ Sarlo's essay is based on the concept as exposed by Hirsch in *Family Frames* (1997). Later on, Hirsch developed this concept in *The Generation of Postmemory* (2012). A fruitful discussion on this topic can be found in the introduction by Jordana Blejmar and Natalia Fortuny to their monographic issue *Revisiting postmemory: The intergenerational transmission of trauma in post-dictatorship Latin American culture* of the *Journal of Romance Studies* (2013).

⁴ These data were published by several media outlets, but it was the seminal newspaper *Zeta* from Tijuana in particular, which accused the PRI government of silencing the numerous deaths caused since Peña Nieto's presidency (see *Proceso.com* 2013).

⁵ See for instance weblog sites such as *El Blog del Narco* | *EIBlogdelNarco.com*.

⁶ This analysis of Adorno's position towards writings on laughter is based on the work of Diane Cohen (2009) and Shea Coulson (2007).

⁷ On *La vita è bella*, Lauterwein states that "Benigni presents *La vie est belle* sometimes as a 'love story', [...], with a message of love and humanity which relegates the Shoah to the background, sometimes he claims the memorialistic finality of the film. This is why one starts feeling suspicious that Benigni humorizes the nightmares of history rather because he loves paradox than because of his commitment to their memory" (2009: 364). On *Inglourious Basterds*, Jean Franco remarks: "Consider a film like Quentin Tarantino's *Inglourious Basterds*, in which extreme cruelty is played for laughs as Jewish commandos in Nazi Germany rival the SS in horrendous acts and scalp their prisoners. Tarantino boasted that 'taboos are meant to be broken,' but when the taboo against harming another is broken, there can be no limits, no social pact" (2013: 1).

⁸ *El infierno* (2010) by Luis Estrada may be considered an exception: it shares a lot with the films of Tarantino (such as *Pulp Fiction*, 1994), since the violence inflicted by the drug gangs is depicted in a brutal, but also comical and sometimes trivial way. At the same time, the complicity of the government in the war on drugs is very much the object of satire, and in that sense its comical dimension is not exempt from a critical and political note.

⁹ For a more detailed analysis, see Adriaensen 2012.

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